From the notes of the Deputy USSR People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Chairman of the Commission on preparation of peaceful negotiations and post-war settlement, M.M. Litvinov, 15 November 1944

On prospects and possible foundation for Soviet-British cooperation

TOP SECRET

[…]

What determined the position of the British Government which impeded the establishment of truly normal and even friendly relations between the two countries? An explanation must be sought primarily in the difference between the systems. Britain acted here as a representative of the entire capitalist world that did not want to fully accept the existence of the socialist state, which has been providing more and more proof of its vitality and success in building a communist state.

It is not surprising then that this policy was most consistently and stubbornly pursued by the representatives of the British financial, industrial and landowner bourgeoisie, that is the Conservatives. [...] When the most powerful continental power, Germany, is defeated, the Soviet state, growing and getting stronger, could once again break the balance of powers. Furthermore, Britain wanted its behaviour to serve an example to other capitalist states, as closer relations between France and the USA and the Soviet Union would be an even greater threat to the balance of powers, not only in Europe, but on a global scale. Still, after 1933 there is a period of calm, free from shocks, but also from attempts to get closer, in the British-Soviet relations.

The social and class hostility towards the Soviet Union has eaten so much into the flesh and blood of the British Conservatives that they could hardly alter their position even when a real threat appeared on the political arena, a threat not only to the British Empire’s interests, but to its entire existence, - the threat of Hitlerite aggression. There is a true documentary proof of the fact that, as early as 1935 the British General Staff started to make their strategic plans based on the belief that Britain’s immediate enemy, with whom it will have to fight, will be Germany, and that Britain and the Soviet Union will become allies and companions-in-arms in the fight with this enemy[[1]](#footnote-1). However, even this has little effect on the Conservatives’ position.

Yet, under the pressure from opposition and public opinion, alarmed at the German threat, the British Conservative Government starts to falter. It slightly relaxes its policy towards the USSR, does not object to its being admitted into the League of Nations, and even reluctantly gives its blessing to the signing of the Soviet-French mutual aid pact. However, it is very reluctant to give up its positions, and it still hopes that a treaty with Hitlerite Germany could be signed and the latter will clash with the Soviet Union. Munich provides an illusion of this hope coming true, but Hitler’s seizure of Austria and Czechoslovakia and his crackdown on Romania and Poland makes Britain’s Conservative Government take steps to closer relations with the Soviet Union.

But it does it so insincerely and so indecisively, that the negotiations with the Soviet Union fall through, with the consequences that are fatal for Britain. Chamberlain’s[[2]](#footnote-2) policy collapses, and Britain not only becomes the USSR’s *de facto* ally in the war against Germany, but concludes an alliance treaty with it for 20 years.[...]

Summary and conclusions. The Signing of the British-Soviet alliance treaty has laid a foundation for a long-term British-Soviet co-operation, but this is but a base, which is not significant unless a corresponding structure is built up upon it. Formally, the treaty validity is restricted to the joint fight against Germany. Considering that the terms of the peace treaty that will be forced upon Germany will not allow the latter to once again become a significant military threat for either of the two allied countries during the term of the treaty, it could be assumed that the actual significance of the treaty is absolutely contemptible. Such a conclusion would not be quite correct though. One should not forget Britain’s behaviour after the First World War, when it immediately started to provide all sorts of assistance to Germany in order to help the latter become stronger, arm, and resume playing a significant role in European affairs. Britain helped Germany to avoid the reparation payments, as well as the military occupation of Ruhr and Rhine regions. In the long post-war struggle between Germany and France, Britain invariably backed the former[[3]](#footnote-3). It contributed to strengthening of the Hitlerite regime internally and to growing of its prestige abroad through all kinds of diplomatic concessions and doles. It prevented France and the League of Nations from taking steps in response to remilitarisation of the Rhine and to Hitler’s annulment of the war clauses of the Treaty of Versailles. In defiance of these clauses, it authorised, through a special naval treaty[[4]](#footnote-4), a rebirth of the German Navy. In short, it has created all these prerequisites that allowed Germany to become so much stronger in political and military aspects, as to openly provide assistance to Franco in Spain, to seize Austria and Czechoslovakia and then to unleash the current war. In view of the above, it should be said that the whole idea of the British-Soviet treaty is that both parties undertake not only to not provide any assistance to Germany, but also not to conduct themselves, nor allow others to conduct, any actions that would help Germany’s resurrection and preparation for a revanche. From this standpoint it would be useful, even before the war ends, to clarify accordingly point 2 in article 3, on no account consenting to paragraph 2 in article 4 which stipulates waiver of said article in case an international security organisation is set up. [...]

Another serious basis for the British-Soviet co-operation stems from inevitable striving of both countries, in their own interests, for ensuring peace in Europe for the longest term possible. It is now recognized as an axiom that the British-Soviet co-operation is an indispensable condition for such peace, and, on the contrary, the lack of such co-operation would create prerequisites for a third world war. This idea has been recently expressed very clearly in the British magazine *The Spectator*: “... Unless the British-Soviet alliance is preserved, then Europe will find itself on a path leading to a new war... If they co-operate, a large-scale war in Europe will become impossible. But if they oppose each other, then war will be almost inevitable.”[[5]](#footnote-5) An indispensable prerequisite of such co-operation and loyal implementation of the treaty as outlined above is of course a maximum elimination of disputes that had existed previously between the Soviet country and Britain, and ruling out the possibility of new disputes arising following the post-war reconstruction.

We tried to prove in this memorandum that the disputes have nearly disappeared, or at least have significantly mitigated. It is highly unlikely that anyone in Britain regards us as an immediate threat to India now. The gravity of the Indian issue has long shifted from defending India from external threats (with the exception of the Japanese threat) to the internal struggle of Britain with the local Indian movement for national liberation. One should now expect a certain pressure from the USA on Britain as regards changing India’s statute. [...] This, however, does not mean that Britain would remain indifferent to our further advancing to the South of Persia and Afghanistan. Britain will continue guarding its approaches to India with no less energy than before. Therefore, it would be necessary after the war to preserve and to appropriately change the existing British-Soviet treaty on Iran and to agree on co-ordination of both countries’ activities in Afghanistan and possibly in Xinjiang[[6]](#footnote-6). The issue of the straits has long lost its acuteness, but it still exists. The current situation is satisfactory for Britain, but not for us. In any case, a revision of the straits convention is inevitable, and Britain is hardly likely to oppose it. We have already noted above that we must strive for the convention to be changed in favour of us, and. if possible, to pass control to the Black Sea coastal countries. We have no grounds to believe that Britain will not concede in this issue. [...]

One of the British newspapers recently decided to revive the issue of pre-revolution debts. Pulling out this issue back from the archives could only be justified if relations between both parties were very strained, but not when there is a mutual striving for co-operation. Under favourable conditions, we could bring up the issue ourselves, in order to finally and fully annul such claims. Equally, the issue of propaganda has long stopped playing any serious role in British-Soviet relations, and it may only be revived as a scarecrow in hostile articles and speeches made by irresponsible people. We should not underestimate though the public opinion factor in Anglo-Saxon countries, which plays a certain role in foreign policy. It may aggravate and inflate even small conflicts, and exert pressure on government policy, as has often happened with British-Russian and the British-Soviet relations.

The only serious contradiction[[7]](#footnote-7) that the post-war era will inherit from the past may stem from the idea of the balance of powers in Europe. This contradiction may even become more acute due to the increased strength of the USSR, which is perceived, following the defeat of Germany and weakening of France and Italy, as the only strong continental European power. However, it is the acuteness of this issue that must push Britain most of all to conclude a treaty with us. Such a treaty cannot be implemented only on the basis of amicable division of security spheres in Europe on the principle of neighbourhood. The Soviet Union could consider its maximum sphere of interests to comprise Finland, Sweden, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Slavonic countries of the Balkans, and Turkey.

The British sphere could certainly comprise Holland, Belgium, France, Spain, Portugal, and Greece. Such schemes were discussed in the well-known book by Walter Lippmann[[8]](#footnote-8), and in numerous publications in the foreign press. For example, the London newspaper *The Times* wrote recently that while the British are interested in ensuring security of own communications in Eastern Mediterranean and in the Middle East, the Soviet Union’s interest is to protect its borders[[9]](#footnote-9). Therefore, to protect its interests Britain strives to ensure amicable relations with Greece and Turkey, while the Soviet Union, in order to protect its interests, must include Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Yugoslavia in the system of Soviet security.

The same opinion is expressed by *The New-York Times*, where it states: “Britain arrived at the conclusion that, along with Czechoslovakia and Poland, the Soviet Union security system must comprise Romania, Bulgaria, and even Hungary and Yugoslavia... The Soviet Union is mainly interested in securing its borders against invasion, while Britain is interested in the communication lines leading to the British Empire countries, and in the security of the Suez Channel and Middle Eastern enterprises. Therefore, Britain seeks friendship with Spain and Italy. Greece is likely to remain in the British sphere of interests.” /TASS, 17 October, p. 3-o/.

This division means that Britain must not undertake entering any particularly close relationships, nor to enter, against our wish, any agreements with the countries that belong to our security sphere, and naturally it should not seek to have military bases there, neither naval, nor air force. The same guarantees may be provided by us with respect to the British security sphere, with the exception of France, which must be given the right to join the anti-Hitler British-Russian treaty. The third, neutral, sphere will comprise Norway, Denmark, Germany, Austria, and Italy, with whom both parties will co-operate on the equal basis and in constant mutual consultation. One may expect that Britain will object to such scheme with regards to Norway, Yugoslavia, and Turkey, which it would like to include in its own sphere, although Norway and Turkey are geographically closer to the USSR than to Britain. Besides, it may insist on guarantees to be provided with regards to the internal system and independence even for the countries of the Soviet security sphere.

What can make Britain agree to such treaty? First of all, as has been noted above, it is understood that serious discords and tension between Britain and the USSR are inevitable in the absence of such a treaty and with us having free rein. The result of the current war will disturb the balance of powers not only in Europe, but on a global scale, which will be especially painful for Britain. Britain will lose its dominance and superiority on the sea, which will undoubtedly be passed on to the USA[[10]](#footnote-10). In the nearest future the US Navy will be nearly twice as large as the British Navy. Lagging behind is even more pronounced for the British merchant fleet, in comparison with the American. According to the published data, by August this year the American merchant fleet grew more than threefold, reaching an enormous figure of 35 million tons, whilst the British fleet now is significantly lower than its pre-war capacity (18 million tons). The British air force is lagging behind the America’s [air force] even more. The American air force is approximately 3 times larger than the British, and in terms of civil aviation the ratio is even less favourable to Britain. The USA will undoubtedly wish to utilise its increased powers at Britain’s expense. We should expect that the USA would strive to rule out Britain’s competition over the entire American continent and even in the British Dominions. Politically it will result in pushing Britain out of its territories that it still preserves on the American continent or nearby, or at least by installing permanent American bases in these territories.

The struggle for oil and rubber will recommence and possibly aggravate. Facing these prospects, that are far from being cheerful, Britain will inevitably think it advisable to address the issue of ensuring lasting calm in Europe by entering a sound treaty with the USSR.

Britain cannot be indifferent to our position considering the serious differences that have already started to appear in its relations with the USA, but do not immediately pertain to our interests. It is hardly possible to sign any preliminary detailed agreements here, but we could have a certain position on the above-mentioned issues if we have a full agreement with Britain on the issues that pertain to us, and quite a different one in the absence of such agreement. Furthermore, common interests of both countries are possible in such issues as, for example, meeting the US claims for Lend-Lease. Likewise, common interests are possible in the Far East, if, following the defeat of Japan, the USA will try to assume an exclusive, or a disproportionately large, role in Japan, as well as in China.

Finally, Britain starts to display significant interest to its future share in our foreign trade. Although this share will be mainly determined by the British industrials’ potential to win the competition with the USA, the role of the political factor here will be of no small importance.

Concluding a general political agreement is desirable as soon as possible, before the end of the war in Europe, or at least, before the end of the war in the Far East. The agreement will expedite resolution of numerous ripe and rather critical issues. Furthermore, while Britain is engaged in a war in the Far East, our position in the negotiations will be stronger than when the military operations are over in all the theatres of war. Speeding up negotiations is also necessary because the British diplomacy is already working on putting together its security sphere, without any consultation with us. This is evidenced by the negotiations with Holland and Belgium, and Churchill’s and Eden’s visit to Paris[[11]](#footnote-11). When the so-called Western bloc is close to becoming a fait accompli, Britain’s position in negotiating with us will be stronger[[12]](#footnote-12).

It is hardly likely that Britain will agree to sign a formal treaty now, because this would be a challenge to Roosevelt. The talk may now only be about reaching an agreement, but the agreement must be as complete and detailed as possible, and be at least in the format of a gentlemen’s agreement.

The agreement should cover:

1. Division of spheres of security in Europe approximately as outlined above.
2. Defining or altering the British-Soviet treaty along the above lines.
3. Mutual consent to revising the Montreux Convention on Straits basing on the proposals that must be worked out additionally.
4. Agreement for the post-war period on Iran, Afghanistan, and possibly Xinjiang.
5. Recognising the need for due consultation on other issues of mutual interest.
6. Issues pertaining to Germany, namely, giving us the Island of Ruegen, and annexation of Helgoland by Britain … .

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[FPARF, f. 0512, inv. 4, fold. 14, file 437, pp. 44–58]

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1. See: JP 105 (4th Revise), Defence Plans for the Event of War against Germany, Provisional Report, 31/10/1935 // TNA, CAB 55/7. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Chamberlain, Neville (1869 – 1940) – British statesman and politician; Chancellor of Exchequer (1931 – 1937); Prime-Minister of Great Britain (1937 – 1940), protagonist of appeasement foreign policy. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A similar idea was expressed by Eden during a meeting with British military on 4 October 1944: “After the last war … we had looked round for possible enemies, and had selected France, with the result that we had soon forgotten the real menace – namely, Germany – and had awoken to our danger too late”, (Minutes of a Meeting held at 4 p.m. Wednesday, 4th October, 1944, in the Foreign Secretary’s Room // TNA, FO 954/22). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This was in reference to the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 18 June 1935 to authorize (in contravention of the Treaty of Versailles) the German Navy’s strength to 35% of that of the British Navy. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In all likelihood, this was in reference to the article ‘Golos Rossii’ [Voice of Russia], published in the *The Spectator,* on 10 November 1944. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. On the Soviet policy in Xinjiang, see: Gasanly Dzh. P. Sin’tszyan v orbite sovetskoy politiki. M., 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Handwritten addition: in the British-Soviet relations. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Lippmann, Walter (1889 – 1974) – American journalist and political commentator, during the war leading observer in “New York Herald Tribune”. In all likelihood, this was in reference to his book *U.S. War Aims*, which was published in 1944. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. As an example, see an anonymous article, written by a well-known political scientist and historian E.H. Carr, entitled ‘Russia, Britain, and Europe’, published in The Times on November 6, 1944 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Maisky expressed a similar idea in January 1944: "... it is America which will emerge as her [UK] powerful enemy and competitor on the world market, in the colonies, civil aviation, merchant navy and so on." See: From the note ‘On the desirable foundations for the future of the world’ from the Deputy People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the USSR, head of the Commission of the USSR People's Commissariat for damages caused by Nazi Germany and its allies to the Soviet Union, I.M. Maisky, to the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the USSR, V.M. Molotov, dated 10 January 1944. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Churchill and Eden visited Paris, 10 - 14 November 1944. It reflected an attempt to strengthen relations with France in light of the Western European group, the project developed by the Post-Hostilities Planning Staff, which named France as the key continental member. The Soviet Embassy in the UK quickly informed Moscow: "We can assume that England is trying to find support for its European policy, since the whole system of British European policy has been broken after France’s defeat in 1940"; Gusev report on 18 November 1944 (АVP RF. F. 059. Op. 12. P. 34. D. 214. L. 250). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. In November - December 1944, intelligence on the Western bloc’s project was being actively sent to Moscow through diplomatic and intelligence channels. According to Gusev, dated November 3, "the Western bloc is conceived as a counterweight to the future Eastern European group under the leadership of the USSR '(АVP RF. F. 059. Op. 12. P. 34. D. 214. L. 210). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)