Despatch from the British Ambassador to the USSR, A. Kerr, to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, A. Eden, dated 27 March 1945 (received 12 April)

No. 211. BRITISH EMBASSY,

MOSCOW.

27th March, 1945.

CONFIDENTIAL

Sir,

[1.] Over a month has now passed since the signing of the Crimea Agreement, which received so warm a welcome throughout the world, and not least in the Soviet Union. It is perhaps too soon to draw up a balance sheet on the results of the conference at Yalta, but a provisional assessment is, I think, justified by developments in Soviet policy during the past month.

2. The Crimea talks covered a wide range of subjects, and the fact that agreement was reached on all of them was the more gratifying because, during the months that went before the Yalta meeting, there had been many instances of lack of consultation and here and there of actual divergence of policy between the Soviet Union on the one hand and Great Britain and the United States of America on the other. I fear, however, that much has happened since to trouble the harmonies established a Yalta and fortify critics, who are incline to question the value of the meeting.

3. In one all-important respect there can be no cause whatever for disappointment. Events have shown that the military decision taken in the Crimea are being carried out so successfully that the final defeat of Germany now seems likely to be only a matter of months. The political decisions at Yalta concerning Germany were equally satisfactory and dispelled many lingering doubts on either side. They have been the subject of much comment in the Soviet press, and it is clear that they are in tune not only with the policy of the Kremlin but also with the mood of the Soviet people.[[1]](#footnote-1)

4. Elsewhere unhappily the picture becomes disappointing and even disturbing. The American delegation attached particular importance to the compromise on voting procedure, which rendered possible the calling of the United Nations Conference in San Francisco in April, and they welcomed M. Molotov’s declared intention to attend in person. His sudden decision to leave the leadership of the Soviet delegation to a man of the meagre calibre of M. Gromyko marks a sharp change of mood which calls for a more convincing explanation than which has been given[[2]](#footnote-2).

5. The most obvious setbacks since Yalta, however, concern the declaration on liberated Europe and that on Poland, about both of which considerable satisfaction had been felt. To our vexation we have found the Soviet Government openly interpreting both these declarations to their own advantage. Their conduct in Romania has been no attempt to consult with us[[3]](#footnote-3) or with the Americans, and we have been expected to condone and indeed to associate ourselves with the decisions to imposed upon King Michael[[4]](#footnote-4) by M. Vyshinski. When we quote the Yalta declaration to the Russians we meet with the reply that our arguments are not in accordance with the Statutes agreed upon for the Allied Control Commission. In other words, the Yalta declaration is being treated by the Soviet Government as little more than a sedative which cannot be allowed to interfere with what is, in the eyes of the Russians, the established right, fully admitted by us[[5]](#footnote-5), to do as they like in Romania. When our protests become more urgent, no time is lost in starting a minor press campaign against General Plastiras[[6]](#footnote-6) and his administration in Greece, as if to remind us that Russian forbearance as regards that country is measured by ours in Romania.[[7]](#footnote-7)

6. But however dissatisfied we and the Americans may be with what has happened in Romania, the Russians know that we are unlikely to make it a real test case in their relations with the West. The must, however, be blind if they do not see that Poland might become such a test case, and their attempt to twist the Yalta communique to the exclusive benefit of the provisional authorities at Warsaw is therefore disquieting. My telegrams will, I think, have shown you that there maybe have been a genuine misunderstanding as to the real meaning of the formula on Poland, and I should add that it was not only the Russian in Moscow who interpreted it as an abandonment by us of the Polish Government in London and an important step towards recognition of the Lublin authorities. But although time is passing and the situation inside Poland is not improving, there still remains some hope of breaking the present deadlock in the Moscow Commission[[8]](#footnote-8), and the time has therefore not yet come to dismiss the Yalta formula as mere waste paper.

7. Of the other Balkan questions raised in the Crimea, the only one which has developed on satisfactory lines is Yugoslavia. But here the Yalta communique only confirmed a situation which already existed and which was pleasing to the Russians. When we turn to Bulgaria and to Bulgarian relations with Greece and Yugoslavia, we find that the representations which you made to M. Molotov, and which I have since renewed more than once in Moscow, have hitherto remained fruitless.[[9]](#footnote-9) In fact, since the Yalta meeting, the Russian, regardless of our representations, have pursued their own Balkan policies, which are clearly based upon support for the Slave states of Bulgaria and Yugoslavia and upon the squeezing of Romania into a mould of their own shaping.

8. On top of all this comes the denunciation on March 21st of the Soviet-Turkish Treaty of Alliance[[10]](#footnote-10). This has followed a press campaign against Turkey which has been proceeding for some months past and which continued even after the Turkish declaration of war upon Germany and Japan, a step to which the Soviet Government had given their approval at Yalta. My Turkish colleague is disposed to take a philosophic view of what has happened and, for the present at any rate, I am inclined to abide by his judgment and to see in the denunciation no more than a wish to put a little of the fear of God into the Turks before raising the question of the revision of the Montreux Agreement[[11]](#footnote-11).

9. One of the more valuable practical results of the Crimea Conference was the agreement concerning the repatriation of British and Soviet prisoners of war.[[12]](#footnote-12) Here again, our experiences have been anything but satisfactory, and it has now proved necessary for you and the Prime Minister to address personal messages to M. Molotov and Marshal Stalin, urging them to ensure that the agreement is carried out in the spirit as well as in the letter. While we clearly cannot accept the present position, allowances should, however, be made for the rooted Soviet object to admit foreign military observers into forward areas; for the Soviet disinclination to show us anything which might appear discreditable to the Soviet Union, for the primitive harum-scarum conditions under which the Red Army lives and moves, and finally for the natural, although inexcusable, temptation to blackmail us into some degree of recognition of the provisional Polish authorities.

10. A further sign of the times is perhaps the attitude of the Soviet delegation at the Trades Union Congress in London[[13]](#footnote-13). The proceedings of this congress have received considerable publicity in this country where it is claimed that the Soviet delegation succeeded in pushing through all of its proposals. This is a subject which calls for fuller treatment than is possible in this review, but it is enough to say here that the Russians are obviously making a serious, in not unexpected, attempt to dominate whatever new international Trades Union organisation emerges from the war.

11. The above developments are certainly uncomfortable. They must have provoked in you, as they have in me, fresh anxieties about future Russian intentions and the possibility of continued collaboration between the Soviet Union and the West after the war. I think, however that while, after the glow of brotherhood at Yalta, we have every right to grumble about recent Soviet behaviour, we should make a mistake if we built up a black record from the events of the past few weeks and if we decided that from implied that the Kremlin had turned away from the policy of co-operation with the West. You will well remember that we suffered similar setbacks and disappointments after all the earlier three-Power meetings. Some observers maintain that Marshal Stalin’s set policy after any such manifestation of inter-allied unity, to take steps to remind his people that the Soviet Union can still go her own way and is in no sense dependent upon her allies. There may well be something in this, but another explanation may be that the Soviet leaders come to such inter-national meetings, as it were, to sniff the air, and to discover how far they can safely go in pushing Soviet interests in those parts of the world with which they are immediately concerned. At Yalta the Soviet leaders no doubt confirmed their impression that they could pursue their own ends in the Balkans without fear of serious opposition, provided always that they stopped short at Greece. Probably the latest development in regard to Turkey may be explained by our expressed readiness to agree to some revision of the Montreux Agreement and by our own criticism of recent Turkish policy[[14]](#footnote-14).

12. It is safe to assume that the Soviet Government are also under special temptation, at this stage of the war, to press ahead with their plans for Eastern and South-eastern Europe while they have a relatively free hand. They must feel pretty sure that, until Germany is finally beaten, we shall not strongly oppose until Germany is finally beaten, we shall not strongly oppose Soviet action in such countries as Romania and Bulgaria. They now with the complete disruption of pre-war social systems, to band internal developments in those countries according to their will. They realise that such an opportunity may not recur and they are determined that, when society crystallises again in those countries bordering on the Soviet Union, the social structure, although not necessarily identical to, will be in harmony with that of the Soviet Union, and that all potential hostile influences will have been eliminated. Similar considerations no doubt guide Soviet policy in Poland, where the Russians have even more reason to fear a re-emergence of hostile and indigestible elements.

13. But this Russian policy, however distasteful it may be to us and however great a strain it may at times put upon our patience and upon our belief in the whole system of collaboration and consultation between the three Great Powers, has the air of remaining a policy of limited objectives, none of which immediately endangers essential British interests. Where these interests are at stake, and the Russians know them to be at stake, as in the case of Greece, they have refrained from intervention and have shown what is for them extreme moderation. Here it is also worth noting that, although the Soviet representatives at Yalta refused to subscribe to any new declaration on Iran, they have in fact refrained from reviving their demands for oil concessions and they seem to have realised that the independence of Iran is a matter of vital importance to us and one in which regard must be paid to our interests and feelings. Turkey is another question where our vital interests and feelings. Turkey is another question where our vital interests are directly engaged[[15]](#footnote-15). Here again, as I have said, there is no proof as yet that the Russians are going further than preparing the way for a revision of the Montreux Convention, to which we have explicit agreed. Finally, we have not since Yalta been faced with any preposterous and blundering public accusation such as the Pravda peace rumour which followed the Tehran Conference.[[16]](#footnote-16)

14. There remains always the troublesome question of Poland. Here the issue at stake, so far as Anglo-Soviet relations are concerned, are mainly psychological. The Russians lack the niceness of feeling which we cherish about an ally for whom we went to war, and they are incapable of measuring the weight that lies behind public opinion in the West and how it bears upon us. They are chiefly bent upon getting a comfortable neighbour. To them this is a matter of the first importance. To us, who are more concerned with decencies, it is not. It may well be that they cannot understand why we should insist upon having so tight a hand upon a question in which no direct British interest is involved. It is possible that at Yalta, in spite of all our efforts, Marshal Stalin and M. Molotov may have got the impression that we might be satisfied with their interpretation of the Yalta agreement[[17]](#footnote-17) as a means of cleansing ourselves of our commitments to Poland. If so, they must be puzzled by our sustained and indeed increased interest in Polish affairs. But for us the Polish question is, and must remain, one of the utmost consequence, for upon its satisfactory solution rests a great part of our hope and belief in the possibility of a real and cordial understanding between the Soviet people and our own. Nevertheless Russian recalcitrance about Poland need not inevitably count as a good pointer to general Soviet policy. It is certainly not, I think, an issue which need prevent the maintenance of an alliance not quite in the form the more optimistic of us had foreseen, but at any rate useful to both countries, in fact, a relationship considerably closer[[18]](#footnote-18) than that which existed between Great Britain and Tsarist Russia between 1907 and 1914.

15. I would suggest, therefore, that while we may hug our wrath and mark our displeasure, we need not be unduly discouraged by the disappointments of the past few weeks, none of which indicates any Soviet intention to impinge upon our vital interests. What has happened has probably been in many cases the result of the recent switch away from an exclusive interest in military preoccupations and of a growing concern for the international situation facing Russia after the war. The Soviet Union is now in a state of high buoyancy and utterly confident of her strength. The manifestations of this confidence are often rough and boisterous. The Soviet Union tends to disport herself like we retriever puppy in somebody else’s drawing room, shaking herself and swishing her tail in adolescent disregard for all except herself. We must expect her thus to rampage until she feels that she is secure from any unpleasant surprises in neighbouring countries, and then we may, I think foresee that she will emerge from her puppydom and settle down to the serious and respectable business of collaboration with her major allies, and still more to that of her relationship with Great Britain under Anglo-Soviet Treaty, a commitment by which she sets great store. Meanwhile we need not, I think, be over nice in our approach to her. When we are shocked we may say so in all frankness. But we must always be a hundred fold in the right[[19]](#footnote-19). We may permit, and indeed we should encourage, franker criticism of Soviet policy and we should put a stop to the gush of propaganda at home and abroad in praise not only of the Soviet effort, but also of the whole Soviet system[[20]](#footnote-20), which can only have convinced the realists at the Kremlin that there is a complex of fear and inferiority in Great Britain where the Soviet Union is concerned. We shall, I am afraid, make little headway with the Kremlin so long as we conduct fruitless arguments with them over such countries as Romania or Bulgaria. On the other hand they will, I think, respect us the more and set a higher value upon our co-operation, whenever we stand up firmly for what the Russians recognises to be our vital interests, as in Greece, in Iran and in Turkey. While memories of German aggression and fears of its revival linger in Russian minds, as they must for some years to come, these fears, together with the need for help in shouldering the heavy burden of reconstruction, should provide a solid basic for Anglo-Soviet co-operation in the major tasks of European reconstruction.

16. We must recognise however that the word “co-operation”, like the word “democracy”, has different meanings in the Soviet Union and in the West. Here it seems to mean the acceptance of something like a division of the world into spheres of interest and a tacit agreement that no one of the partners will hamper or indeed criticise the activities of the other within its own sphere. The Soviet Government will probably contribute according to their lights to the maintenance of a façade of respectability before the world, but they will judge their partners and conduct their policy towards them by their own realistic standards. Our value as a partner will also be judged by our strength and by our readiness to stand up for our own right and interests. Wherever and whenever we show signs of weakening we may expect to be pounced upon. We must therefore not only be strong, we must look strong and, so far as possible, we should confine our quarrels with the Russians to issues on which we are prepared to stand our ground. Even then we shall have still to make allowances for the unpredictable factor of Russian suspicion of us and of our motives. These have not yet, and, I fear, never will be, entirely dispelled. We are therefore always at the mercy of some sudden squall which at best interrupts the smooth conduct of day-to-day relations and at worst may destroy confidence in both countries in the maintenance of the Anglo-Soviet alliance after the war. For myself I do not think that we need allow recent events to lead us to fear this worst. As I see it, His Majesty’s Government have never set more than sober hopes upon the alliance, or asked of it any more than sober hopes upon the alliance, or naked of it any a little commitment with the United Sates or even with France[[21]](#footnote-21). In the circumstances in which it was concluded the alliance seemed to me to be one of those flashes of genius from time to light our foreign policy. In this view I remain unshaken for I am convinced that the alliance will serve us well and pay a steady, though not spectacular, dividend.

I have the honour to be, with the highest respect,

Sir,

Your most obedient, humble servant,

[SIGNATURE] Archibald Clark [Kerr]

[TNA, FO 371/47941]

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1. Publishing materials from the Crimean conference on 13 February 1945, Soviet newspapers – *Izvestiia* in particular – noted that it ‘will go down in history as an event of the greatest world significance… The spirit of unity, the clear demonstration of solidarity and consensus in the response to all fundamental and vital issues was also a defining feature of the Crimean conference… The Soviet people are firmly convinced that the resolutions of the Crimean conference will be enacted with decisiveness and consistency in the interests of all freedom-loving humanity’ (Izvestiia. 13.II.1945. S. 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Soviet authorities explained the official absence of Molotov as head of the Soviet delegation to San Francisco as due to his being occupied by the April session of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR; however, foreign statesmen doubted this version (for Churchill’s opinion see: WSC Minute to Foreign Secretary, 25.3.1945 // CHAR 20/209; for Harriman’s: FRUS. 1945. Vol. V. Washington, 1967. P. 822; for Catroux’s: Catroux à Paris, 30/03/1945 // AN, Papiers Bidault 457 AP 82). The real reason had more to do with Moscow’s displeasure at the unfolding details of the Berne incident (Anglo-American talks with German representatives in Switzerland). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The reference here is to the political crisis and the change of the head of the Government in Romania in March 1945, which was brought about under conditions of uncompromising Soviet pressure (Vyshinsky was in Bucharest at this time on a visit). The head of the new government, the leader of the National Democratic Front P. Groza, was characterised by the Foreign Office as ‘a Transylvanian lawyer of doubtful financial reputation, who amassed a large fortune at the end of the last war while dealing with Agrarian reform and expropriation proceedings. He is to all intents and purposes a Communist’ (W.P. (45) 143, Memo by Eden, 05/03/1945 // TNA, CAB 66/62). For more detail see: Tri vizita А. Ia. Vyshinskogo v Bukharest, 1944 – 1946: dokumenty rossiiskikh arkhivov / Sost. Т.V. Volokitina i dr. М., 1998; Rieber A.J. The Crack in the Plaster: Crisis in Romania and the Origins of the Cold War // The Journal of Modern History. 2004. Vol. 76. No. 1. P. 62–106. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Mihai I (b. 1921), of the Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen dynasty, King of Romania in 1927 – 1930 and 1940 – 1947. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A characteristic hint of Kerr to the “percentages agreement” during Churchill and Eden’s visit to Moscow, in October 1944, which underlined the seriousness with which the British side regarded the understanding. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Plastiras, Nikolaos (1883 – 1953) – Greek general and politician, Prime-Minister of Greece (1945, 1950, 1951 – 1952). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Earlier, the idea of a *sui generis* parallelism between the Greek and Romanian questions was mentioned by Churchill in a message to Roosevelt dated 8 March: ‘I am most anxious not to press this view to such an extent that Stalin will say “I did not interfere with your action in Greece, why do you not give me the same latitude in Romania?”’ (Churchill & Roosevelt. Vol. 3. P. 547). At the mention of the Greek question at Yalta, Stalin noted the priority of strategic factors in his thinking about it (Krymskaia konferentsiia. S. 169). This same logic is present in internal Soviet documents, although the degree of criticism of British actions in Greece was sharper: ‘we don’t know how governments have been formed in Belgium, France, Greece, etc. We’ve not been asked, although we’ve not said that we’d like this or that from these governments. We haven’t interfered since this zone of activity belongs to Anglo-American forces’ – so wrote Molotov in the margin of a memorandum from Vyshinsky of February 1945 (АVP RF. F. 06. Op. 7. P. 39. D. 588. L. 1.). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This was a commission staffed by Molotov, Kerr and Harriman, tasked with implementing the Yalta resolutions in relation to the formation of a Polish coalition government. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. As far back as 14 November 1944, Kerr passed on to Molotov a personal message from Eden, which reflected British unease about Bulgaria’s fulfillment of reparation conditions in respect of Greece. In January 1945, the arrival in Moscow of a Bulgarian trade delegation caused fresh alarm at the British Embassy. In the reply from the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs of 12 March, the Soviet side emphasised that Soviet-Bulgarian trade talks in no way touched upon Bulgaria’s payment of reparations (See: SANO. Т. 2. S. 268–269, 304). The pressure on the British Embassy was also intensified by Churchill in a message dated 28 April, in which he emphasised that Britain could not be completely displaced from Romania and Bulgaria. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This was the Soviet-Turkish Treaty of 17 December 1925. A declaration by the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs was passed to the Turkish Ambassador Selim Sarper on 19 March to the effect that ‘in consequence of the great changes that have taken place, especially in the course of the Second World War, this treaty no longer corresponds to new circumstances and is in need of drastic improvement’. (This information appeared in print on 21 March.) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The Turkish Foreign Minister H. Saka was also in an analogous position, having met with the British ambassador in Ankara, M. Peterson, on 22 March and having requested British recommendations concerning the form and content of the reply to Moscow. ‘Saka further explained that their greatest worry was that the Russians might have a plan to revise the Montreux Convention in a bilateral understanding before a new [Soviet-Turkish] treaty was negotiated and before it was brought to any meeting of the three Grand Alliance powers’. (The Turkish Minister’s thinking is described by Sitki Bilgin M., Morewood S. Turkey’s Reliance on Britain: British Political and Diplomatic Support for Turkey against Soviet Demands, 1943 – 47 // Middle Eastern Studies. 2004. Vol. 40. No. 2. P. 32). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For the texts of the agreements (dated 11 February and signed by Molotov and Eden) as well as notes clarifying a number of their clauses see: Krymskaia konferentsiia. S. 263–275. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For the texts of the agreements (dated 11 February and signed by Molotov and Eden) as well as notes clarifying a number of their clauses see: Krymskaia konferentsiia. S. 263–275. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Even the entry of Turkey into the war against Germany on 23 February was greeted with a certain coolness in Great Britain. *The Times* recalled the ‘exaggerated’ caution of Turkey in 1943 – 1944, when action from her side could have been of great value. At the same time, the Foreign Office, uneasy about the Soviet position, stressed the need for closeness with Ankara. ‘We shall certainly have need of Turkey after the war… We must do all we can to “cherish” her’ Eden wrote on one of Peterson’s telegrams on 24 February (cited in: Tamkin N. Britain, Turkey and the Soviet Union, 1940 – 45: Strategy, Diplomacy and Intelligence in the Eastern Mediterranean. Basingstoke, 2009. P. 171). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In this regard Kerr’s position coincided with the assessment of the zone of priority interests, by which the USSR would be able to inflict the damage that had been directed by the Subcommittee of Post-War Planning (see the memorandum of 6 June 1944). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. On 17 January 1944 *Pravda* published a report from its own correspondent in Cairo (dated 12 January), in which it was asserted that based on information from ‘trustworthy Greek and Yugoslav sources’, a secret meeting between Ribbentrop and leading British figures took place in one of the coastal towns of the Pyrenees which sought to clarify terms for a separate peace with Germany: ‘It is suggested that the meeting was not fruitless’ (*Pravda*. 17.I.1944). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The reference is to the different interpretation of the words of the protocol of the Crimean conference regarding the mechanism for forming the Polish Government. The Russian language variant said the commission in the persons of Molotov, Harriman and Kerr should ‘consult in Moscow in the first instance with members of the current Provisional Government’ (Krymskaia konferentsiia. S. 260). The British and Americans insisted that the phrase ‘in the first instance’ related to ‘in Moscow’, which fundamentally altered the meaning of the agreement reached. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Apparently, Kerr was not using the term ‘alliance’ in a literal sense: the Russo-British accord of 18 (31) August 1907 did not propose circumstances for mutual assistance. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. An analogous idea had been formulated earlier in one of the letters of the British envoy in Moscow J. Balfour: ‘… where, but only where, the Allies have just cause for complaint that their legitimate interests are being set at nought, a restraining influence can be brought to bear by appeals to Stalin himself on matters of real importance’ (Extract from a Letter from Mr. Balfour (Moscow) to Mr. Warner 16/01/1945 (Annex to W.P. (45) 156) // TNA, CAB 66/63) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For more detail on this issue see: Bell P.M.H. John Bull and the Bear: British Public Opinion, Foreign Policy and the Soviet Union 1941 – 1945. London, 1990. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Kerr again was using the term ‘alliance’ outside the sense fixed in the officially established agreement. A treaty of alliance and mutual assistance would only be concluded between Great Britain and France on 4 March 1947 (The Treaty of Dunkirk). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)