Minutes of conversations between Chairman of Council of People's Commissars, I.V. Stalin, and British Foreign Minister, Ernest Bevin, dated 19 December 1945

SECRET

RECORD OF CONVERSATION OF COMRADE I.V. STALIN WITH E. BEVIN, SECRETARY FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF GREAT BRITAIN

# 19th December, 1945

at 22:15

In attendance: Molotov, V. Pavlov (PCFA), Kerr, the British ambassador, A. Cadogan, Permanent Under-Secretary and McAfee, the interpreter.

Comrade Stalin says that he was just visited by Byrnes, with whom he discussed the list of countries to be invited to the conference for the discussion on peace treaties drafts. Byrnes thinks that if India is to be excluded from the list, it will be necessary to also exclude Belarus and the Ukraine, and if India is to be left on the list, both Belarus and the Ukraine should remain on the list, althoug without inclusion of the three Soviet Baltic republics. The fact is, it is impossible to solve this issue right away. It is necessary to discuss it with the British people.

Comrade Stalin says that Byrnes then asked about Iran. If Bevin wants, Comrade Stalin can inform him on his conversation with Byrnes.

Bevin answers in the affirmative.

Comrade Stalin declares that Byrnes spoke about the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Iran. Comrade Stalin’s reply to Byrnes was that the Soviet Government does not yet intend to withdraw its army from Iran. The Soviet Government wants to protect the Baku region and its oil fields. Security of this area is not guaranteed, as the Iranian government is being somewhat hostile to the USSR.

Bevin asks whether the Soviet government is really afraid of an Iranian attack on the Baku region.

Comrade Stalin says that the Soviet government is not afraid of this, but is afraid of saboteurs being sent to the Baku region who can set oil fields on fire.

Bevin says that in this case, he will speak to Generalissimo Stalin about the concerns of Great Britain. In Great Britain they say that the Soviet policy in Iran is geared towards the absorption of Iranian Azerbaijan into the Soviet Union or to a Soviet Azerbaijan. The British government does not have such a point of view, but such opinions exist in the House of Commons. British public opinion is very sensitive to events in Iran. One of these days, Bevin had said to Molotov that there are places in the world where both the Soviet Union and Great Britain have their interests and that in these places it is necessary to eliminate any reason for conflict between Great Britain and the Soviet Union. Great Britain has interests in the Middle East: in Iraq, in Mosul. If the British government understood the Soviet Government intentions in Iran, the British public opinion would not be nervous and scared.

Comrade Stalin answers that he can assure Bevin openly and fairly that the Soviet Union does not have any territorial intentions concerning Iran. The Soviet Union does not intend to annexe Iranian Azerbaijan to the Soviet Azerbaijan or to the Soviet Union. Soviet Union does not intend to damage the sovereignty of Iran. However, the Soviet Government should protect the Baku region from possible diversions. The fact is, that there are many extremist Iranian nationalists in the Iranian government who want to cause damage to Baku and, as Comrade Stalin knows, pursue the old program of absorbing the Baku region into Iran. As for the plans of Baku regions joining Iran, Comrade Stalin has no concerns. However, the danger of saboteurs sent to the Baku region is quite realistic.

Bevin asks whether, hence, Iranian Azerbaijan will remain part of Persia.

Comrade Stalin answers positively.

Bevin says that he would like to raise one issue which keeps worrying him since he became Foreign Secretary. It is about the establishment of provincial councils in Iran. Bevin already suggested to Iranian authorities to do it. Bevin thinks it would be good if a tripartite commission were formed for carrying out this measure, with representatives of the Soviet Union, the USA and Britain. Bevin believes that they are not in a condition to carry out reforms independently. Bevin studied this issue and became convinced that such reform in Iran is necessary in the interest of peace in the country and the elimination of fears, like the one regarding Baku. Bevin is not putting this issue to the British Cabinet yet. But if Generalissimo Stalin is receptive to Bevin’s suggestion, then Bevin will bring this issue to the attention of Americans as well.

Comrade Stalin answers that, the Soviet Government would quite possibly be receptive to this suggestion. However, it is necessary to know how the establishment of provincial councils will be carried out.

Bevin answers that, as far as he knows, the establishment of provincial councils is in Iran’s constitution, but is not being implemented.

Comrade Stalin answers affirmatively.

Bevin says that if article of the constitution is not abided by, then he doubts that Iran’s situation will remain satisfactory.

Comrade Stalin says that it is possible.

Bevin remarks that it is his personal conclusion.

Comrade Stalin suggests to examine and then, perhaps, to consider this issue. On his own behalf, he obliges to consider it and to report to Bevin his final opinion.

Bevin says that he would like to know about the difficulty in relations between the Soviet Union and Turkey. The Turks complained to the British about the war of nerves which is being waged against them, etc.[[1]](#footnote-1) As far as Bevin has heard, these difficulties are to do with several Turkish provinces.

Comrade Stalin replies that there are two issues. One of them is the Straits. According to the Montreux Convention, when there is a danger of war Turkey has the right to decide unilaterally whether to close the Straits or not. It is also Turkey’s prerogative to preside over the mode of operation in the Straits – that is, when it closes them down. This creates a very difficult situation for Russia, as Turkey blocks out the Soviet Union. The Soviet Government wants the Soviet Union to gain access to the Straits. The second issue concerns the provinces populated by Georgians and Armenians and occupied by Turkey. In these regions it is necessary to restore the border that existed at the time of the Tsarist government[[2]](#footnote-2). Georgians and Armenians have claims on specific Turkish provinces. Turkey says that Soviet Union is planning to go to war with them. But this is nonsense. The Turks have made all of this up.

Bevin asks how the Soviet Government plans to resolve these issues.

Comrade Stalin answers that he plans to solve these issues through negotiations either with Turkey or with the Allies.

Bevin asks as to how the Soviet Union is proposing to resolve these issues.

Comrade Stalin replied that the Soviet Government wants to have the border that existed until 1914 restored in the regions occupied by Georgians and Armenians, which now constitute a part of Turkey.

Bevin asks whether the Tsarist government ruled over the territories of the said provinces for a long time.

Comrade Stalin says that the tsar’s government owned these territories since the [18]70s. These regions were populated by Georgians and Armenians long before Turks came there. As is known, Turks have appeared on the present territory of Turkey in the XI, XII and XIII centuries.

Bevin says that he doesn’t know this issue well enough and that this issue needs to be examined.

Comrade Stalin says that this issue should be examined.

Bevin asks about the Soviet Government’s claims concerning the Straits.

Comrade Stalin answers that the Soviet Government wants Soviet vessels and the vessels of the Black Sea countries to have the right of free passage through the Straits.

Bevin said that, initially, military bases were mentioned. Is that still the intent?

Comrade Stalin answered in the affirmative.

Bevin says that Turkey will be in a difficult situation if the Soviet Union could unilaterally close the Straits.

Comrade Stalin says that the Soviet Union cannot do this. The fact is that Turkey, as the war demonstrated, is not capable of defending itself. In the course of this war, Turkey was afraid of Germany, the Soviet Union, and other countries.

Bevin asks as to what will happen to Turkey if it finds itself at war.

Comrade Stalin answers that, in such a case, its interests should be made a top priority.

Bevin asks whether Turkey can close the Straits if it is attacked from Europe.

Comrade Stalin replies in the affirmative, and adds that countries interested in the Straits should assist Turkey.

Bevin says that he would like to get concrete suggestions on this issue in order to assess the possibility of convening a conference.

Molotov asks whether Bevin even considers it possible for the issues regarding bases for the Soviet Union and the granting of rights of passage to the Soviet Union to be up for debate.

Bevin says that the British government never objected to the revision of the Montreux Convention.

Comrade Stalin says that the proposals which Bevin wishes to receive should be and will be worked out.

Bevin says that he does not mean that the discussion on these issues should not take place at the conference in Moscow, and that he will be grateful to receive the proposals.

Bevin says that he would ask the Soviet government not to force Turkey to keep its armies mobilized.

Comrade Stalin replied that Turkey kept its forces mobilized throughout the course of the war, motivating them initially with the threat of Germany, and then – from Bulgaria. The question is, against whom does Turkey now keep its army.

Bevin says that Turkey is afraid of the Soviet Union.

Comrade Stalin replies that it has nothing to fear from the Soviet Union.

Bevin says that in this case he will contribute to a conducive atmosphere in Soviet-Turkish relations.

Bevin says that he has one more question. During the session of the Council of Ministers in London, the Secretaries tried to resolve the issue of the Dodecanese Islands. Bevin would like to know whether he can now hand over these islands to Greece and withdraw British forces from there.

Comrade Stalin asked to let him think this question over and expressed hope that he will meet Bevin once again before the latter’s departure from Moscow.

Bevin says that he would very much like to meet Generalissimo Stalin before his departure from Moscow.

Comrade Stalin answers that he is at Bevin’s service and that if Bevin wants to discuss more issues, then, he, Comrade Stalin, is ready to find time for him.

Bevin says that he would like to talk about the conference on the development of agreements. Bevin believes that the Soviet Government is not fond of India’s inclusion.

Comrade Stalin answers that India is not a sovereign state and that India does not even have a Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

Bevin says that the viceroy of India is engaged in international affairs.

Comrade Stalin says that the King [Viceroy] only deals with issues concerning mutual relations between Britain and India.

Bevin replies that foreign policy issues are left to council to solve, which includes Hindus among its members. The British government is trying to gather a constituent assembly in India.

Comrade Stalin replies that the Soviet Union does not have any links with India.

Bevin says that it is necessary to begin with something and that he would agree to start. It is a very important issue. For the last 150 years India has been a British subject, and now the British government wants to help Hindus with organizing their own government.

Comrade Stalin says that granting the rights to India is the best method of keeping India under Great Britain. If India does not get gain rights, then secession movements may develop within India.

Bevin says that the British government understands this quite well. There are many religious conflicts in India, and it is necessary to be extremely cautious in one’s approach to specific problems within India.

Bevin says that the British government wants to transfer India’s governance to the Hindu population, and with this aim in mind, it asks for India to be allowed to participate in the conference discussing peace treaties, and also insists for India not to be excluded from the Far East Commission.

Comrade Stalin suggests that, in this case, Bevin should concede to something or other.

Bevin says he has difficulties with Byrnes. Bevin agreed to Ukraine’s and Belarus’s participation - two countries equal to India in their status.

Comrade Molotov remarks that Bevin also agreed to include the three Baltic Soviet republics.

Bevin answers that the Americans do not want this, but if the Soviet Government insists, then he will not object. Bevin asks that the Soviet Government approve the [word missing] as it now stands. In this case, the difficulties with the Americans would be settled, and it would cause deep satisfaction in Britain.

Comrade Stalin asks to be allowed to think this question over till tomorrow.

Bevin asks Comrade Stalin to be magnanimous on this issue. If the Soviet Government could accept the list suggested by Bevin, then it would help him to improve his relations between India and the USA, from whom the British government is currently borrowing money.

Comrade Stalin reiterates that he will think this question over till tomorrow.

Bevin thanks Comrade Stalin for the conversation and says that he would like Generalissimo Stalin to inform the British government if he thinks that the British government policy may cause difficulties between Great Britain and the Soviet Union. On his own behalf, Bevin undertakes to do the same regarding the Soviet Government.

Comrade Stalin remarks that this is implied as such by the British-Soviet agreement. The Soviet Government complies with the spirit of this agreement and intends to observe it.

Bevin says that if the Soviet Government wants to, he is ready to renew the British-Soviet agreement for up to 50 years.

Comrade Stalin says that, in this case, it should then be improved upon.

Bevin declares that he sincerely believes that if the Soviet Union, the USA and Britain observe their agreements with each other not just in spirit, but to the letter, then the world will not see any troubles arise for a long time.

Comrade Stalin remarks that it is true, but adds that the Soviet Union does not have any agreements with America.

Bevin says that, even though there are no agreements with the USA, there is an arrangement.

Comrade Stalin says that there is a ‘gentleman's agreement’.

Bevin says that, in the end, he would like to mention the issue on the so-called Western bloc. It is necessary to understand that Great Britain needs agreements with France and other West European countries for trade, just as Russia needs special agreements with the Balkan countries for the same purpose, but Bevin will never undertake any activities concerning the Soviet Union which he could not explain to the Soviet Government.

Comrade Stalin says that he trusts Bevin.

Bevin declares that he does not want any more blocs in Europe. There are already enough of them.

[RSASPH, f. 558, inv. 11, file 285, pp. 13–20]

Keywords: Iran, Turkey, post-war Asia, inter-allied relations, the Balkans

1. December 1945 was marked by a new round of tensions in the Soviet-Turkish relations: don 4 December, during a demonstration in Istanbul the offices of the pro-Soviet newspapers *Tan* and *Tarqaie* were destroyed; the Soviet Ambassador Vinogradov protested, accusing the Turkish police of planning the action. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Earlier, the ethnic diversity of the Turkish population had also been considered by Stalin to be a weakness, which could be exploited. At the end of November 1940, Dimitrov noted the following words of Stalin’s in his diary: ‘We shall drive the Turks into Asia. What is Turkey? There are two million Georgians there, one and a half million Armenians, a million Kurds, and so forth. The Turks amount to only six or seven million’ (The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov. P. 137). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)