Foreign Office memorandum, ‘Survey of Present Situation in Germany’, 24 April 1946[[1]](#footnote-1)

ANNEX

24 April, 1946

SURVEY OF PRESENT SITUATION IN GERMANY

D. Soviet Zone

Administration and Politics

56. The first reports from the Soviet zone were black: famine, disease, disorder, mass removals of equipment, machinery, livestock, rails and even of people. The German population was terrified and everything seemed to have turned out just as Dr. Goebbels[[2]](#footnote-2) had predicted. War had come home to roost with a vengeance. Conditions in the zone during the first period, with the exception perhaps of Saxony and Thuringia, were, in fact, appalling. In Frankfurt on the Oder the Soviet-installed burgomaster told members of the first conducted press tour that 12,000 people, one-sixth of the population, had died in the first six months from sheer hunger. This statement was alter officially amended to 12,000 deaths by all causes. In the first flush of victory and after the reconquest of their own devastated areas, the Red army were not in the mood to respect persons or property. To have held them back would probably in any case been impossible. But it was above all the Soviet “iron curtain” policy which gave plausibility to the wildest rumours. It was felt that there must be something to hide.

57. When, therefore, in January, the first carefully conducted journalists were allowed to visit the zone, it came as a general surprise that conditions in Saxony and Thuringia, if not in Brandenburg, though far from good, were much the same as in the other zones. There were several reports of a “maze of smoking chimney stacks” of conditions that compared very favourably with those in the Polish administered territories over the border. There can be little doubt that they were on the whole correct, and that behind the “iron curtain”, lifted on occasion to suit Russian convenience, a positive policy was being pursued. Admittedly, reorganisation was accompanied by some confusion and inconsistencies. In their closed zone the Russians were evidently digging themselves in. They were not merely ruthlessly eradicating a Fascist order, but also energetically creating a new order to put in its place, the new order being based on a single class, a single party and a controlled economic pattern.

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61. Anti-Fascist parties were set up immediately after the collapse and later the four main parties of the United Front[[3]](#footnote-3) referred to above were allowed to develop. The idea of Berlin as the capital of Germany and the headquarters of German parties in all zones was encouraged. The traffic of ideas was, however, to be one way. Berlin views and Marxism were to be exported and dumped on the western political market, but bourgeois democratic sentiments were not to be imported in exchange. When elections are held it is likely that the United Front will go in the poles as a single list, though the Liberal parties will perhaps be allowed to participate separately in order to create the illusion of democracy and to keep the door into the western zones open. But the Social Democrats have already been practically eliminated and forced into fusion with the Communists as a Socialist Unity Party[[4]](#footnote-4). That there was no genuine and spontaneous wish for fusion can been seen from the resistance with which it has met in Berlin where the Social Democrats can hope for support from the Western Allies[[5]](#footnote-5). But in the Soviet zone itself the Social Democrats have succumbed to the mixture of bribery and intimidation to which they have been intensively subjected.

62. In addition to the political parties, the Soviet authorities make great use of trade unions to further their ideas. Trade union activity on a strictly Soviet model is sedulously fostered[[6]](#footnote-6). The cooperative movement is also put to use and will no doubt be developed, as elsewhere, as a means of eliminating all opposition through the use of the ration card.

63. Meanwhile propaganda to Germans is being intensified. Repeated rumours are heard that once the Socialist Unity Party is set up Soviet occupation forces will be withdrawn. There have been inspired rumours that German reparation plant will not be removed. There is also talk of a possible revision of Germany’s eastern frontier. The issue of German political unity has been exploited to the full. The Communists (and all the Berlin parties) have spoken strongly in favour of the Ruhr for the German worker. Separatist movements have been attacked. Berlin Communists have also to some extent encouraged the public to compare the relative order and prosperity in the east with the chaos and famine in the west.

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E. Berlin

The City’s Importance

68. Berlin, politically today is three things: the capital of defeated Germany, the seat of Allied Control Council and the centre of the Soviet zone and headquarters of the Soviet Military Government.

69. As the old capital Berlin has importance in the following ways: The association and tradition of government remain – once a capital, always a capital. Again, all German political parties and many Germans who do not belong to parties still regard German political unity as the one thing which must be saved out of the national wreck; the suprazonal status of Berlin is, in a way, a guarantee of that unity, for the presence of four Powers in Berlin acts as a guarantee against absolute domination by any single Power.

70. As the seat of the Allied Control Council and its subordinate committees and directorates Berlin is the place where the four zones, as well as the four Powers, meet. Its four sectors are British, American, Soviet and French respectively. They are the zones of Berlin. Its Control Council in miniature is the Komendatura. It is a sort of fifth zone – an international island in the Soviet zone of occupation. At Potsdam it was decided to treat Germany as an economic whole and to establish certain German central administrations. Berlin is, inevitably, the place where such administrations would be set up and the only logical centre of such an economic whole.

71. As to Berlin’s position as the centre of the Soviet zone and the headquarters of the Soviet occupation forces, it should be remembered that the city was captured by Soviet troops and, on the principle that takings are keepings, it is not surprising that they should regard it as more theirs than anybody else’s. Also, while they were in sole charge they were able to do the initial cleaning up. Soviet nominees were appointed to many posts in the city administration and police. This influence remains. An island in the Soviet zone, Berlin is largely dependent on Soviet goodwill. The three western Allies are responsible for the feeding of their respective sectors, but the food, the trains, the roads, must all pass through Soviet territory, For the Soviet Element it is the home ground. The western Allies are playing away.

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The importance of keeping a foothold in Berlin

74. The conflict of national interests in policy towards Germany is reflected in miniature in the quadripartite control of Berlin. It might at first sight be agreed that it would avoid friction all round if Berlin were left to the Russians, and that in remaining there we are only going out of our way to invite Allied quarrels in what seems essentially a German cause. This would, however, appear to be a shortsighted view. The importance of Berlin has already been emphasised. If our foothold were lost, eastern Germany would be completely sealed off from the west. Such division would be purely one-sided, since the western Allies would find that they could not effectively seal off western Germany from the east – just as today Soviet views and news are exported to the world but little world news is imported into the USSR[[7]](#footnote-7). In addition our withdrawal from Berlin and the loss of prestige it must involve, would go far to convince many Germans in the west that unity and security could only be achieved by accepting communism in their turn. They would surely feel that Soviet domination in the east had come to stay and they would wonder how long the western Powers would continue to hold on in western Germany.

IV. ESTIMATE OF RUSSIAN INTENTIONS

75. It is perhaps a mistake to exaggerate the clearness of purpose of Russian policy in Germany. The Soviet Government may well be as perplexed as we are ourselves. Nevertheless certain broad conclusions may safely be drawn. It is fair to assume in the first place that the Soviet Government have retained an abiding impression of the offensive and defensive power of Germany as shown in the war. They have no wish to take any risks with Germany which, at any rate if aided in her recovery by other Powers, could once again prove a very formidable enemy. She must therefore be kept weak and safely contained. Equally formidable in Soviet eyes is a combination of the western democracies, of whose potential offensive power the late war bears eloquent witness. This combination, strong in itself, would become still stronger if harnessed to that of a Germany restored with western support and guidance. It also possesses, in Soviet eyes, a great power of political attraction for Germany. If relying on their material power and moral influence, the western Powers could see their way to draw western Germany into their orbit, the Soviet Government would think it natural that they should proceed to do so; and they are keenly on the watch for signs of such a development.

76. There may be said therefore to be three main elements present in Soviet policy towards Germany: -

(a) preventing at all costs the revival of a strong and independent Germany;

(b) preventing western Germany with the Ruhr, or even the Ruhr alone, being brought into any close grouping of the western democracies; and

(c) ensuring that Germany eventually looks east and remains under strong, and if possible exclusive, Russian influence.

Meanwhile, the Soviet Government are faced with the problem of pursuing their aims in, at any rate outward, association with a group of Powers for whose material resources they have a healthy respect and for whose ulterior intentions they have a deep mistrust.

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79. They are unlikely to be in any hurry to modify this situation of their own accord, more particularly as both the unitary Germany and the zonal Germany have disadvantages from their point of view. They may also wish to avoid any fundamental decisions until after the French elections[[8]](#footnote-8) and perhaps until they can estimate the prospects of the Socialist Unity Party catching on in western Germany or, alternatively, of the western democracies successfully organising a reasonably prosperous existence in the western zones. They are probably less certain than some western thinkers that a unitary Germany governed from Berlin would necessarily be under decisive Soviet influence. Even a Communist Germany would be unlikely to forget or forgive the amputation of the eastern provinces, for all the efforts the Russians could use to divert its hostility to the west; nor are the traditions and doctrines of Russian and German communism identical. On the other hand they may well see grave dangers in the zonal solution, lest it result in the permanent establishment of western and capitalist influence in the western zones, the incorporation of western Germany in the western bloc, and the integration of a revived German industry in the western economic system[[9]](#footnote-9). An acute observer in Berlin recently summed up his view of Russian intentions as follows. The developments of the past few weeks had now convinced him that the Soviet authorities had no intention of permitting effective four-Power control over the affairs of their zone. They might conform to certain formal four-Power rules, but they would run their zone politically and economically as a matter of their own exclusive concern. They would not allow it to be effectively treated as part of a German economic whole. On the other hand they would no doubt be anxious for Germany to be treated as a unit for purposes of political activity, since this would promote the spread of the new Socialist Unity Party throughout Germany. Their hope was, from a secure and inviolable base in their own zone, to extend their influence westwards. Only when Germany was unified politically in the way they wished would they allow Germany to be unified economically and by that time they would think that Germany should be run by Germans and not by the Allies.

80. Of one thing we may be sure. They will not rest content with organising their own zone. Already they are actively supporting the Communists in the western zones and, as soon as they feel their organisation sufficiently complete, they may be counted on to launch out on a more forward policy in the west. Herr Grotewohl[[10]](#footnote-10), the Social Democrat leader of Berlin, who has espoused the cause of fusion with the Communists, put the matter the matter in a nutshell in a speech celebrating the decision of the party conference in favour of fusion. “The new party” he said “will not half at the Elbe”.

[TNA, CAB 129/9]

Keywords: post-war Germany, post-war USSR

1. It was distributed among Cabinet members in the form of an appendix to Bevin’s memorandum Policy towards Germany dated 3 May 1945. Bevin formulated the chief aim of this document thus: ‘The attached paper sets out some of the problems facing us in Germany, with particular reference to the question whether we should continue to work towards a unified (though federalised) Germany, or whether, in view of the Russian attitude and the danger of Communist domination of Western Germany we should regard this as dangerous and work towards a Western German State or States which would be more amenable to our influence?’ (C.P. (46) 186, Memo by Bevin, 03/05/1946 // TNA, CAB 129/9; it is published in part below). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Goebbels, Paul Joseph (1897 – 1945) – Nazi German statesman and politician, Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda (1933 – 1945). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It was formed on 14 July 1945 and included the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), the Liberal Democratic Party (LDPD) and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. With encouragement from Moscow and the Soviet occupation authorities, the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) and the Socialist Party of Germany (SPD) merged into the Socialist Unity Party (SED) in the Soviet zone, with the unification congress taking place April 21-22, 1946 in Berlin. Naimark, *The Russians in Germany,* 275-284. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The assessments of the Soviet diplomat V.S. Semenov, political adviser to the Soviet Military Administration in Germany in March 1946, were analogous: ‘The greatest difficulty in the work of uniting the two parties is encountered in Berlin where the opponents of unification find direct support from their allies’ (SSSR i germanskii vopros. Т. 2. S. 380). The Soviet authorities regarded the future leader of the SPD in West Germany K. Schumacher as one of the most pro-British German politicians of the left. In a note to Molotov dated 16 March 1946, Lieutenant-General F.E. Bokov, a member of the Military Council of the Group of Soviet Forces in Europe with responsibility for Soviet military administration, wrote of him as ‘a well-known supporting voice of British propaganda’ (SSSR i germanskii vopros. Т. 2. S. 404). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Describing the reaction of the British and Americans to the Conference of the Trade Unions of the Soviet Zone that had taken place in Berlin (9-12 February), Semenov ascertained the fact that ‘the Allies have deemed this fact the illegal merging of Berlin trade unions with trade unions from the Soviet zone.’ (СССР и германский вопрос. Т. 2. С. 382). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In turn, their own sector of Berlin was important both for the Soviet authorities and for the German Communists as a kind of “shop window” for the whole zone of Soviet occupation. Discussing the conducting of coming general elections in autumn 1946 with Soviet representatives in May 1946, the Chairman of the directorate of the SED O. Grotewohl emphasised the role of reconstruction work in Berlin: ‘this is the visually emblematic part of the work … we must show our sector of Berlin to be the best’ (SSSR i germanskii vopros. Т. 2. S. 541). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The discussions about British strategy that took place in April 1946 among the Chiefs of Staff demonstrated a more uncompromising mood among the British armed forces than among politicians and diplomats. The report The Future of Germany and Ruhr (5 April) was permeated with ideas of the USSR as the most likely potential adversary in the future, the imperative of denying Soviet domination of a reborn Germany, and using Germany in the event of conflict with the USSR as a means of buying time for the deployment of Anglo-American forces on the continent. (C.O.S. (46) 105 (O), Report by COS, 05/04/1946 // TNA, CAB 129/8. See also: Portniagin D.I. Plany SSSR v otnoshenii Germanii v predstavleniiakh britanskogo Ministerstva inostrannykh del (1945 – 1949 gg.) // Vestnik slavianskikh kulꞌtur. 2014. №.3. S. 44–45. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Such anxieties were, in fact, voiced by Soviet representatives. In a detailed note (16 March 1946) from Lieutenant-General Bokov to Molotov called The Ruhr and British Plans for the Creation of a “Western Bloc” – based on analysis of the British press, official pronouncements (particularly Bevin’s speech of 21 February), and information gathered from German workers in the Western occupation zones – Bokov noted that: ‘already at the start of this year a sharp turn was observed in British policy on the issue of the Ruhr region. British reactionary circles have begun more and more often to come out in favour of creating a Germany of separate states[;] … the striving of British policy towards turning the Ruhr and Rhineland-Westphalia regions into the economic fulcrum of a planned Western bloc directed against the USSR is clearly evident.’ (СССР и германский вопрос. Т. 2. С. 398). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Grotewohl, Otto (1894 – 1964) – German statesman and politician, leader of Socialist Unity Party of Germany (1946 – 1950), Prime-Minister of German Democratic Republic (1949 – 1964). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)