Memorandum of a Russia Committee[[1]](#footnote-1) meeting on Cominform developments and W. Churchill’s view on Anglo-Soviet Relations, dated 29 January 1948

SECRET

RUSSIA COMMITTEE

I. Cominform Developments

The meeting considered a paper which had been prepared on recent developments connected with the Cominform. This was approved, subject to certain amendments, for submission to the Secretary of State. Mr. Gee[[2]](#footnote-2) informed the Committee that the General Council of the T.U.C.[[3]](#footnote-3) has asked the Executive Bureau of the W.F.T.U.[[4]](#footnote-4) to let them know by the end of the first week of February whether they would summon an early meeting to discuss the Marshall programme. It was known that when this proposal was discussed the Soviet representative had said that whilst he was not prepared to agree to a meeting in February, the U.S.S.R. would be prepared to accept a meeting any time after the end of March.

II. Mr. Churchill’s views on Anglo-Soviet Relations

The Committee then considered a minute by the Northern Department concerning Mr. Churchill’s recent speech in the foreign affairs debate, in which he urged that His Majesty’s Government should seek a settlement with the Soviet Government “through diplomatic channels” before it was too late. It was explained that the main object of the minute was to discover the Committee’s views on the desirability of investigating whether it was possible to proceed on these lines. It had not been possible to find out from Mr. Churchill what method of approach he had in mind. The Committee was however informed by General Jacob[[5]](#footnote-5) that Mr. Churchill had made a suggestion to Mr. Marshall that the Western powers should, whilst the atomic bomb was still in U.S. hands, inform Stalin of all their basic requirements for a general settlement with the Soviet Union and attempt to reach an overall agreement with Stalin. It seemed very probable therefore that in his speech Mr. Churchill was following the same line of thought.

In discussion the Chairman pointed out that any approach to the Soviet Government must be made primarily by the United States at the present time. Therefore we should ask the State Department to clear their minds, both on their policy towards a Western Union and also on the lengths to which they were prepared to go in making an attempt to reach a settlement with the Soviet Government. A recent exchange of telegrams with Washington, revealed no clear United States policy on how far they were prepared to cooperate in the formation of a Western Union. Further the economic and political consolidation of Western Europe would take decades. The United Kingdom was politically and economically the strongest power in Western Europe. Even if we get Marshall Aid on acceptable terms we should at the end of the period, still be in economic and financial difficulties; the position of the other countries who would receive Marshall Aid was worse. The State Department must therefore be made to realise that if they wanted to check the Russians they must be prepared not only to give prompt Marshall Aid but to go further.

In view of what the Committee had learnt about Mr. Churchill’s line of thought and what Sir E. Hall-Patch[[6]](#footnote-6) has said about the prospects of the political and economic organisation of Western Europe it was agreed that the question should be approached on somewhat different lines.

Mr. Warner[[7]](#footnote-7) pointed out that Mr. Churchill’s main idea seemed to be to have a show-down with Stalin before the Russians had the atomic bomb instead of dealing with various questions at a series of meetings with Molotov. He thought that in principle the idea was sound. He himself had been surprised by the ease with which the Soviet Government and the satellites had apparently been diverted from their line of policy in some recent events. In particular, various gestures made recently by the U.S.A, in regard to the Mediterranean and comparatively mild representations in Belgrade and Sofia seemed to have sufficed to stop recognition of the Markos “Government”[[8]](#footnote-8) (to be followed by more open help); reports from H[is] M[ajesty’s] representatives in Belgrade and Sofia of conversations with members of the Yugoslav and Bulgarian Governments suggested that they were hesitating to take any drastic step at present. He suggested therefore that a minute should be prepared for submission to Sir Orme Sargent[[9]](#footnote-9) giving the information which had come to light about Mr. Churchill’s suggestion of a show-down with the Soviet Government, and suggesting that it would be worthwhile to study the question further and possibly to link it with other questions relating to the Western Union in present discussions with the U.S. Government. The committee agreed. In discussing the Northern Department minute in which reference had been made to the possible recognition of a Soviet sphere of influence, Mr. Wright[[10]](#footnote-10) pointed out that while the term “spheres of influence” was anathema to American public opinion as a phrase, but in fact American policy was that certain countries must be kept from falling under Communist influence. This was, however, different from making an approach to the Soviet Government suggesting a “spheres of influence” agreement.

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1. The Russia Committee was an inter-departmental Foreign Office committee established in December 1917, in the immediate aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution. In the post- Second World War period, its remit was the long-term planning of British policy and strategy towards the Soviet Union. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hubert Gee (dates unknown) - British politician. Special Labour Relations Officer at the Foreign Office (1947 - unknown). Gee’s remit was to liaise between the TUC (Trades Unions Congress) and the Labour Party, and to keep the Labour Party and the TUC on a course approved by the Foreign Office. See Vickers, R. *Manipulating Hegemony: State Power, Labour and the Marshall Plan in Britain* (Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2000), pp. 83-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. T.U.C. - Trades Unions Congress. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. W.F.T.U. - World Federation of Trade Unions. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Jacob, Sir Edward Ian Claud (1899 - 1993) - British general, politician and broadcaster. Military Assistant Secretary to the War Cabinet (1939 - 1945), Controller of the BBC European Service (1946 - 1947), Director of the BBC Overseas Service (1947 - 1951), Director General of the BBC (1952 – 1959). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hall-Patch, Sir Edmund Leo (1895–1975) - British diplomat. Assistant Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs - Economic (1944 - 1946), Deputy Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs - Economic (1946 - 1948), Permanent Representative at the OECD (1948 – 1952). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Warner, Sir Frederick Archibald (1918–1995) - British diplomat. Second Secretary at the Foreign Office (1948), First Secretary at the British Embassy in Moscow (1950 - 1951). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Vafiadis, Markos (1906–1992) - Greek communist leader. Prime Minister of the Greek Provisional Democratic Government (1947 - 1948), War Minister of the Greek Provisional Democratic Government (1947 - 1949). Exiled to the Soviet Union in October 1950. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Sargent, Sir Orme G. (1884 - 1962) - British diplomat. Deputy Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs - Northern and Southern Europe (1939 - 1946), Permanent Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs (1946 - 1949). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Wright, Sir Michael R. (1901 - 1976) - British diplomat. Counselor in the British Embassy in Washington (1943 - 1946), Assistant Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs - Middle East, Africa and North America (1947 - 1950), Ambassador at the British Embassy in Oslo (1951 - 1955). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)