Minutes of a Russia Committee meeting concerning the British response to Soviet policy in Europe, dated 25 November 1948

RUSSIA COMMITTEE

Minutes of a Meeting held in the Foreign Office on 25th November 1948 at 330 pm

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The meeting then considered Mr. Hankey’s paper on “British policy towards the Soviet Orbit in Europe” and Mr. Jebb’s comments on it.

MR. JEBB said he had received a minute from Mr. Gee stressing the importance from the point of view of Labour of not increasing the tempo of the cold war at the present time to the extent indicated in Mr. Hankey’s paper. It was important in his opinion to bring public opinion along gradually and by all means to avoid creating the opinion that we were preparing war against the U.S.S.R.

SIR IVONE KIRKPATRICK[[1]](#footnote-1) said that, in the present state of our finances and in view of public opinion, he thought that it would be best to start any kind of offensive operations in a small area and suggested for consideration in this regard Albania. Would it not be possible to start a civil war behind the Iron Curtain and by careful assistance to produce a state of affairs in Albania similar to the state of affairs that the Russians had produced in Greece? MR. JEBB pointed out that United Nations observers in Greece would certainly come to hear of any operations we were undertaking and would complain to the United Nations with possibly unpleasant consequences. MR. BATEMAN suggested that though Albania was a very weak point in the Soviet orbit there might be some advantage in allowing the rift there to widen without our interference especially as the Russians were in Albania in some force. SIR IVONE KIRKPATRICK enquired whether it would not be possible to arrange that the operations should be undertaken by the forces of resistance in Albania. We knew that there was opposition to the present regime and it should be possible to make use of it. MR. ROBERTS pointed out it was simple for the Russians to arrange for offensive operations in other countries without formally committing the Soviet Government since they worked through the local Communist parties. We had no similar instrument and the position of H.M.G. was therefore more difficult. MR. DENING[[2]](#footnote-2) stressed the dangers of becoming involved in political commitments in Albania by using part of the population against the rest. It meant that you became beholden to the people on whom you depended. This had produced complications in the last war and might well do so again. MR. MAKINS said that in his opinion the value of underground movements was doubtful. He felt that, in the last war, if the effort expanded on underground operations had been put into straight military operations the results would have paid us better.

MR. WRIGHT said that any action we undertook must be co-ordinated with the Americans. THE COMMITTEE agreed. MR. ROBERTS pointed out that the most helpful development form our point of view in the Soviet orbit had been the quarrel between Tito and the Cominform. It owed nothing to us and if we went in for too much activity on the lines suggested it would only have the effect of consolidating the orbit. Similarly all the success that we had achieved in uniting Western Europe was chiefly due to Molotov and the Cominform. We must be very careful in anything that is done not to prevent developments like the Tito/Cominform dispute […]

MR. WARNER stressed the importance of sapping the loyalty of the Soviet-controlled police and armed forces. He pointed out that the Communists had achieved success by the use of secret police and instanced the case of Poland where 80% of the population supported a government which was, in fact, overthrown by the 20% minority in control of the police and armed forces.

SIR IVONE KIRKPATRICK pointed out the importance of the time factor. We must know how long we had at our disposal to reach the objectives. In the first place it was important to get Germany straight before devoting any attention to other countries. Events in Greece, S.E. Asia and Berlin had repercussion in Western Germany. We should first aim at settlements in places where we were already at grips with the Russians. LORD TEDDER said that he thought we should aim at winning the “cold war” (by he meant the overthrow of the Soviet regime) in five years’ time. MR. ROBERTS said that, in his opinion, if we aimed at unseating the Soviet Government in five years by means other than war, we were undertaking an impossible task. LORD TEDDER suggested that there should, in any case, be a small permanent team which would consider plans which would subsequently be executed by ourselves and the Americans. […]

SIR IVONE KIRKPATRICK pointed out that if we won the battle of Berlin we would be much nearer our goal. This was a major stage in the cold war. He made it clear that the foundation of the “cold war” was, in fact, the proper conduct of the diplomatic battles at present in dispute between ourselves and the Russians. The eventual success or failure of the “cold war” depended on their outcome. […]

Summing up, MR. JEBB suggested that a sub-committee should be set up to examine this question and report back to the Russia Committee. He read out terms of reference for the Sub-Committee with which the Committee agreed.

[TNA, FO 371/71687]

Keywords: great power relations, the Balkans, post-war order

1. Kirkpatrick, Sir Ivone A. (1896 - 1964) - British diplomat. Minister at the British Embassy in Berlin (1944 - 1945), Assistant Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs - Information and Culture (1945 - 1948), Assistant Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs - Western Europe (1948), Deputy Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs - Political (1948 - 1949), Permanent Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs - Germany (1949 - 1950), High Commissioner for the Federal Republic of Germany (1950 - 1953), Permanent Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs (1953 - 1957). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dening, Sir M. Esler (1897 - 1977) - British diplomat. Assistant Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs - Asia/Far East (1946 - 1950); Political Representative and Ambassador at the British Embassy in Tokyo (1951 - 1957). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)