Report from British Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Sir Alvary Gascoigne[[1]](#footnote-1), to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, A. Eden, describing public’s reaction in Moscow to Stalin’s death, 16 March 1953

CONFIDENTIAL

SIR ALVARY GASCOIGNE’S IMPRESSION OF THE POPULAR BACKGROUND AGAINST WHICH EVENTS IN MOSCOW TOOK PLACE, SOON AFTER PREMIER STALIN DIED

Sir,

In my despatch No.33 of 12th March I had the honour to report on the funeral of Premier Stalin: in this despatch I have the honour to give my impression of the popular background against which the events of the past week have taken place. In the recent days of emotional stress and unrehearsed drama, some insight into the natural instinct and behaviour of the “Soviet person” may have filtered through to the foreign observer, who usually has to live in complete isolation from the indigenous population. I therefore asked all members of my staff to contribute descriptions of their personal experiences during this period. I shall now endeavour to amalgamate them in this despatch.

[…]

2. The first news of Stalin’s illness was received on the morning of 4th March[[2]](#footnote-2). The long and detailed medical bulletins appeared to have little effect on the ordinary life of Moscow, whose citizens went about their work in the normal way. Some women in the streets and at our homes were visibly affected by the news of Stalin’s illness, and some taxi-drivers commented dourly on the bad news: but the majority of the population remained apparently completely unmoved.

3. The announcement of the death of Stalin was made over the Moscow radio early on the morning of 6th March. From that time Radio Moscow was entirely given up to official announcements and talks on matters concerned with his death. The intervening time was filled by suitable music. The voices of the announcers were extremely well chosen for the occasion and the announcements most impressively delivered. The newspapers were black-edged: queues formed at all bookstalls.

4. Shortly after the announcement had been made conventional red flags and bunting with black edges appeared on houses and public buildings. Cinema placards and entertainments posters were pasted over with white paper, and the theatre columns of the daily newspapers cut out with razors from the publicly-displayed copies. Apart from this, the general air of indifference in the streets was remarkable, and the arrival in the city of troops and reinforcements of militia seemed unconnected with the lack of tension in the city. By 3 p.m. about 70,000 of these had been deployed in the central area of the city, and it was impossible, because of barricades of lorries and troops, to reach the Red Square or the Hall of Columns in which the lying-in-state took place, from the surrounding districts. The body of Stalin was removed from the Kremlin to the Hall of Columns at 4 p.m. It was conveyed in an unimpressive blue bus, such as is used for any of the more important funerals in Moscow. Until this time Moscow had remained quiet. Soon afterwards, however, the crowds which began to gather at the barricades gave an indication of the pressure which the controlling authorities would have to resist throughout the three days of lying-in-state[[3]](#footnote-3).

[…]

7. Several members of my staff penetrated to the Hall of Columns that night. The stereoscopic cinema opposite the Hall of Columns was the headquarters of the militia. None was admitted to the hall without a special pass or escort. In the vestibule of the cinema many militia officers were sitting in a heavy atmosphere of smoke, eating sausages and drinking beer, talking and laughing, and there was unimpeded access to the commanding officer’s room. The latter sat at a green baize-covered table with the neck of his tunic open, shouting indiscriminately at all corners. At 11 p.m. he banged the table with his fist, sprang to his feet and declared: “I’m damned if I’ll issue another pass tonight; get out, the lot of you!” But two and a half hours later my acting air attaché was personally conducted through the hall without a pass by a junior militia officer.

[…]

9. The crowd increased around the outer perimeter during the night. At no time did there appear to be any real grief amongst the population, but there was an atmosphere of tense expectancy, which, later, by 7th March, was transformed into almost a holiday spirit; families joined armed in promenade formation, and, despite the temperature of 10–12 degrees below zero, the old women did a lively trade in ice-cream amongst the queues.

[…]

16. In trying to analyse public opinion we have had to rely mostly on our domestic staffs, but in the crowds people did not seem careful to whom they talked, and one private soldier accepted a lift from one of my staff whom he took for a Lithuanian. At no time when talking to barricade guards or to the populace was there any sign of antipathy to foreigners shown by troops or civilians. Amongst the older people it was expected that Molotov would take over the reins of government; there is a traditional yearning still amongst the Russians (the women at any rate) to have a “Little Father”, which was frequently heard applied to Stalin, and there was none but Molotov who could fill this role. Malenkov is little known and unprepossessing in his published photographs; he does not appear to be popular and there has evidently been some rumour circulating amongst the Russians that he is really Bulgarian and not Soviet born. Amongst the younger people it seems that it has been recently accepted that Malenkov would probably be Stalin’s successor; nevertheless, it was remarked by some that the old guard were once again in all the commanding positions, and the rising generation appeared again to have fallen into the background.

[…]

18. An announcement concerning a partial amnesty for political prisoners has also been apparently expected in some quarters. Such an amnesty was granted on the death of Kalinin[[4]](#footnote-4).

19. Comments were also passed by those to whom we spoke on the unseemly haste in announcing the governmental changes. It was felt that it would have been more respectful to the memory of the dead leader to have delayed the announcement at least until after the funeral; although it was appreciated by some that the reason for this speed was that the Government wished to avoid anxiety amongst the broad masses.

20. Peasant opinion, however, may be represented by two comments overheard in the central kolkhoz market: “Stalin was our leader and guide. Others succeeded him. But whoever lives in the Kremlin, life for us poor people remains hard and unchanged.” “God has His appointed time even for the godless”.

[…]

22. The most striking features of these remarkable six days have been the ordinary Russian’s apparent indifference to this historical event; the air of released expectancy and excitement in the crowds during the lying-in-state, to the exclusion of more sober sentiments; and, perhaps most of all, the remarkable success with which the troops and militia prevented all but a moiety of the 7 ½ million population of Moscow from seeing either Stalin’s lying-in-state or his funeral.

[TNA, PREM 11/540]

Keywords: Stalin’s death

1. Trench-Gascoigne, Alvary Douglas Frederick (1893–1970) – British diplomat, appointed Second (from 1925), and then First (from 1933) Secretary at the Foreign Office, Consul General in the Tangier Zone and the Spanish Zone of the Morocco Protectorate (from 1939), political representative in Japan (1946–1951), Ambassador to the USSR (1951–1953). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. According to the memoirs of Dr. A.L. Miasnikova, the autopsy revealed that I.V. Stalin had been ill for a considerable length of time. On 2 March, I.V. Stalin was diagnosed with paralysis on the right-hand side of his body; he lay unconscious for several days after that. Stalin’s death occurred on 5 March 1953 at 21:50, as a result of a brain haemorrhage owing to hypertension and arteriosclerosis. See: Khlevniuk О.V. Stalin. Zhiznꞌ odnogo vozhdia. Biografiia. М., 2015. S. 420-426. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The period of public mourning for Stalin took place between 6 and 9 March 1953. Around a hundred people were killed in trhongs on the streets of Moscow. See: Khlevniuk О.V. Stalin. Zhiznꞌ odnogo vozhdia. Biografiia. М., 2015. S. 428-429. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A huge amnesty was declared in accordance with a decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on 7 July 1945: *On the Amnesty in Connection with the Victory over Hitler’s Germany*. On 27 March 1953, the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union signed new decree, *On Amnesty*,as a result of which more than half of prisoners convicted under non-political articles were freed. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)