Foreign Office memorandum on Soviet policies after Stalin’s death, 9 April 1953

CONFIDENTIAL

SOVIET POLICIES AFTER STALIN’S DEATH

Internal Situation at Stalin’s Death

1. One of the main functions of the 19th Party Congress[[1]](#footnote-1) held in Moscow in October 1952 was to give impetus to a general tightening-up of discipline throughout Soviet society. Party members were given specific obligations to fight corruption and sabotage and to report their neighbours’ shortcomings to higher authority. The Soviet rulers sought to create an impression of limitless confidence, but Malenkov’s speech[[2]](#footnote-2) concentrated much more on shortcomings and malpractices in all walks of Soviet life than did Stalin’s reports in 1934 and 1939. Moreover, there had been evidence of widespread malaise in the satellites during the past year. As might, therefore, have been expected, the congress was followed by measures to strengthen discipline, particularly in economic matters. In January 1953 there occurred the bizarre episode of the Kremlin’s doctors’ “plot”, and the vigilance and security campaign was linked more directly with the external threat.[[3]](#footnote-3)

2. While all this suggested the possibility of new purges, there was no atmosphere of tension in Moscow comparable with that of the thirties. It looked as though Stalin was once more preoccupied with the problem that had beset him since the beginning of the five-year plans – that of human resistance to the pace which he had set for basic economic development. There is no evidence of any organised resistance, even of a passive kind. What Stalin probably feared was loss of revolutionary élan, indifference and the desire, encouraged by the recent rise in the standard of living, for an easier life. There is also the possibility that Stalin may have become increasingly suspicious, authoritarian and even unaccountable during the last months of his life.

Measures taken by Stalin’s Successors

3. Such seems to have been the internal situation which Stalin’s colleagues inherited. They had also the separate problem of taking over power and consolidating their own position internally. Against this background, which they themselves dramatised by talking of “panic and disarray”, they have taken the following measures:

A. Internally

(i) The eight leading members of Stalin’s old Politburo have assumed the key posts in the new Administration, maintaining roughly the same relative positions as they occupied before Stalin died. The one possible exception is Molotov’s ranking with but after Malenkov and Beria.

(ii) They have reorganised the Government so that Malenkov and the five Deputy Prime Ministers[[4]](#footnote-4) (Beria, Molotov, Bulganin, Kaganovich and Mikoyan) have more direct control over the administration: internal affairs, foreign affairs, defence and trade are under their immediate supervision: and the other ministries have been grouped so that the chain of command will be simpler.

(iii) They have reorganised the Presidium of the party so that discussion of policy will be confined to a small group: it now consists of fourteen members instead of the thirty-six as agreed at the 19th Party Congress.

(iv) They have reorganised the party Secretariat, from which Malenkov has resigned. A leading member of the Presidium, Khrushchev, has become the senior Secretary, but it is not yet clear whether the party Secretariat remains the key position, as it was when Stalin and Malenkov used it to manoeuvre their way to power.

(v) They have taken five important steps to strengthen popular acceptance of the new regime: -

1. The popular Marshal Zhukov has been restored to favour and given a post in the Government[[5]](#footnote-5).
2. They have granted an amnesty on an even bigger scale than that granted at the end of the war (sentences of less than five years cancelled as compared with three).
3. They have now, by releasing the Moscow doctors and publicly castigating the methods of the former Ministry of State Security, suggested that they may be prepared to go to considerable lengths to give the impression of safeguarding the liberty of the subjects.
4. The annual lowering of prices announced on 1st April covers a wider range of goods than any since 1950.
5. They have taken the initiative toward a détente in international affairs. But this can best be dealt with under B below.

B. Externally

4. Reports of greater courtesy and moderation on the part of Soviet representatives, already current before Stalin’s death, have become more frequent, and certain practical steps to reduce international tension have already been taken by the present leaders in Moscow. The more important reflections of the new line have been:

(i) Molotov’s undertaking to use his good offices with the North Korean Government for the release of Western civilian internees.

(ii) The Communist offers, endorsed by Molotov, to exchange sick and wounded prisoners in Korea and to resume the negotiations at Panmunjom; and of a formula for the repatriation of prisoners of war accepting the voluntary principle.[[6]](#footnote-6)

(iii) Soviet acceptance of M. Hammarskjold as the new Secretary-General of the United Nations.[[7]](#footnote-7)

(iv) Conciliatory gestures in Germany, such as the proposal for air safety talks, the easing of certain restrictions on Berlin communications and very tentative feelers for a resumption of four-Power talks on the future of Germany[[8]](#footnote-8).

5. A desire for a détente could be explained in terms of the problems which faced the Soviet leaders when they took over power. There are no grounds for believing that there have been any changes in the ultimate objectives of Soviet policy, that is to say: in the short term, the disruption of N.A.T.O. and the promotion of revolution in colonial and “semi-colonial” territories; in the long term, the establishment of a world system of Communist States under Soviet leadership. Stalin’s successors were selected by him during and after the Great Purges, they have been closely associated with him for many years and there has been no evidence to suggest that they have disagreed with his basic policies. They need a respite, however, while they consolidate their power both internally and vis-à-vis the satellites. Moreover, they may well feel that in the new situation a more subtle approach in foreign policy will not only be safer but will be better calculated to divide the Governments opposed to them (above all to divide the United States and its allies), and to lull their populations into a sense of security; it may also bring benefit to foreign Communist parties. A tactical change, apparently of a major kind, in Soviet foreign policy seems to be beginning. Although there is no doubt some uneasiness in Moscow over American intentions, we cannot assume this change to be mainly a defensive move inspired by the present degree of Western consolidation. The developments under (iv) above may indeed be the first sign that the Soviet leaders intend to use the détente for a diplomatic offensive against the consolidation of the Western position in Europe through the ratification of the E.D.C. Treaty and the Contractual Agreements with Germany. It is also possible that the Soviet leaders hope to increase the West’s economic difficulties by introducing a détente at a time when the Western economies have been geared to rearmament; they might seek to aggravate the uncertainties thus caused by renewing their own “trade offensive”.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Conclusion

6. So little is known of the character and views of Malenkov and Beria that it would be wise to keep an open mind in interpreting Soviet moves since Stalin’s death. It is much too soon to draw any firm conclusion. But the Soviet internal situation, coupled with the problems of the new leaders in consolidating power in a totalitarian State, could in themselves explain the new and apparently more cautious trends in Soviet foreign policy. There is no evidence of any active challenge to the present rulers, but they have obviously found it expedient, while no doubt maintaining ultimate Soviet aims, to make the carrot more evident than the stick in their handling of the Soviet population and also to adopt more fluid and even more conciliatory tactics in foreign policy. Such tactics might well prove more dangerous to Western cohesion and to the building up and maintenance of the military and economic strength of the West than the bludgeoning xenophobia displayed by Stalin since 1946.[[10]](#footnote-10) But this change of tactics offers an opportunity to the Western Powers, who should meet Soviet conciliatory moves half-way with a view to reaching agreement on specific outstanding questions. We must avoid being lulled into a sense of false security and must continue with the essential measures still required to complete the defensive strength of the non-Soviet world. By preserving such a balance and avoiding any suggestion of a desire to exploit the new situation provocatively, the West will best be able to impress upon the new rulers of Russia, if they are in a jumpy or uncertain mood, the possibility of continued peaceful co-existence, or, if they are coolly trying out a new tactical approach, the difficulty of disrupting Western unity and cohesion.

7. The questions summarised above are examined in more detail in three annexes to this paper: -

Annex A. – The Internal Situation in the Soviet Union on Stalin’s Death.

Annex B. – The New Administration in the Soviet Union.

Annex C. – Recent Indications of Soviet Foreign Policy.

8. The possible effects of Stalin’s death on Sino-Soviet relations are discussed in Annex D.

[…]

ANNEX C

*Recent Indications of Soviet Foreign Policy*

Almost at once after assuming power the new Government in the Soviet Union took steps to secure a détente in international affairs. In their orations at Stalin’s funeral Malenkov, Beria and Molotov protested their peaceful intentions (though in terms little different from those used by the Soviet propaganda in the past) and refrained from provocative attacks on the West. Reports of greater courtesy and moderation on the part of Soviet representatives, already current before Stalin’s death, have since come in from many quarters. Among the reflections of this new line have been:

(i) Molotov’s offer to use his good offices with the North Korean Government for the release of Western civilian internees;

(ii) Molotov’s agreement that the projected moves of the British and United States Embassies in Moscow[[11]](#footnote-11) need not take place;

(iii) The moderation displayed by the Soviet representatives at the recent meeting of the Economic Commission for Europe in Geneva[[12]](#footnote-12);

(iv) The Communist offer, supported by Molotov, to exchange sick and wounded prisoners in Korea, resume the negotiations at Panmunjom, and to agree to a more acceptable formula on the repatriation of prisoners of war;

(v) Soviet acceptance of M. Hammarskjold as the new Secretary-General of the United Nations;

(vi) Conciliatory gestures in Germany.

2. These moves obviously represent a new approach in international affairs. The problem they pose is whether there is going to be a real change in Soviet attitude to the Western world, or whether they merely indicate a temporary tactical retreat; and if the latter, how great the retreat is to be.

3. On general grounds it would be unwise to expect a change of basic policy in a Government which has changed so little in composition. All the present Soviet leaders have been associated with Stalin for many years, and in the absence of strong evidence to the contrary must be presumed to have shared his basic assumptions on the relations between the Soviet Union and the Western Powers, i.e., that the world has split into the two camps of socialism and capitalism (now headed respectively by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the United States of America) between which a constant struggle is inevitable. Indeed, in their public speeches (e.g. Malenkov’s report to the 19th Party Congress last October[[13]](#footnote-13)) all Soviet leaders have subscribed to this thesis; and according to it any real and lasting settlement between the two worlds is out of the question. In spite, therefore, of the conciliatory moves by the Soviet Government which have been listed above there can at present be no grounds for believing that the ultimate objectives of Soviet policy are in any way changed. They remain: in the short-term, the disruption of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and promotion of revolution in colonial and “semi-colonial” territories; in the long-term, the establishment of a world system of Communist States under Soviet leadership.

4. Though Soviet ultimate objectives and Soviet strategy must be expected to remain constant there is room for considerable fluctuations in Soviet policy on the tactical plane; and it has now become clear that the new administration have deliberately opened a more conciliatory phase. Three explanations can be offered:

(i) The Soviet leaders may have been conscious of internal weakness and may be intending to lead up to a number of limited agreements with the Western world which will not only lower the international temperature but show the Soviet people that under the new Government peace is more secure than it was under the old; and

(ii) They may have felt that the new situation offered a suitable opportunity for a more subtle approach in foreign policy which would be better calculated to divide the Governments which were opposed to them and lull their populations into an easy sense of security, and perhaps promote a severe economic recession in the West with obvious repercussions on Western solidarity and unity.

(iii) There may have been some uneasiness over the possible reactions of the new American Administration and of its Republican supporters if no attempt was made to reduce international tension.

It is quite possible that the Soviet leaders have been influenced by all these considerations.

5. In his speech at Stalin’s funeral Malenkov said that Soviet foreign policy would be based on “facts, on realities, and supported by facts”. This may well reflect the cast of his mind. He has himself devoted his career to internal political questions; and to judge, for example, from his speech to the 19th Party Congress he is more likely to see Soviet power in the world growing through the development of the Soviet Union’s own internal economic strength than through military/political successes abroad in the near future.[[14]](#footnote-14) The ruling group in the Soviet hierarchy is now heavily weighted with men of similar outlook and experience – the generation of the Five-Year Plans. These considerations suggest that for some time to come the Soviet Government will be primarily concerned with strengthening their control over the internal situation in the Soviet Union and throughout the Soviet bloc, and with continuing to develop the Soviet Union’s basic industrial/military strength. If this hypothesis is correct Soviet foreign policy will probably try to serve these Soviet interests by means of:

(i) A more conciliatory attitude on practical problems, thus lulling Western suspicions;

(ii) A temporary abandonment of direct action methods (i.e. the war in Korea), switching to

(iii) A renewal of a diplomatic offensive, possible subjects being:

1. Proposals for Four-Power talks on Germany, especially as the Soviet Union has an interest in preventing the ratification of the European Defence Community;
2. More flexible proposals for disarmament and the control of atomic energy;
3. Renewed proposals for an Austrian Treaty.

(iv) An attempt to increase the West’s economic difficulties; the Soviet leaders may calculate that a political détente will itself have this effect at a time when Western economies have been geared to rearmament; and they may try to aggravate the situation by renewing their own “trade offensive”.

(v) A continuation or Peace Campaign tactics, perhaps without provocative anti-Western propaganda.

(vi) Continued efforts to promote trouble for the Western Powers in colonial and semi-colonial territories.

(vii) Emphasis upon exploiting the possibilities of new and more “conciliatory” Communist tactics in Asia.

Soviet policy in the longer term will depend on the success of the tactics now being adopted and on future Western strength. The absence of Stalin will obviously make difference in detail, but there seems no reason to think that it will radically alter the Soviet threat. One obvious factor will be missing – Stalin’s personal prestige in general and not least his prestige as a supreme arbiter on doctrinal matters, his position as the successor of Marx, Engels and Lenin. This may make relations with China even more difficult, though even here it would be unwise to expect a significant weakening of Moscow’s authority. The Kremlin will be able to quote the words of Stalin and to support any advice or ruling which they may consider it desirable to give to other Communist Parties. More important factors, however, will remain i.e., the known ability and resolution of Stalin’s successors and, most important of all, the Soviet Union’s position as a great military/industrial Power.

*Western Policy*

[...]

7. It seems legitimate to draw the following conclusions for Western policy:

(i) We should welcome the more conciliatory attitude which the Soviet Government is showing on certain international problems, and be prepared to turn the situation to the advantage of the free world in order to secure agreements; but we should be wise to assume that Soviet ultimate objectives have not changed.

(ii) We should continue to build up our defensive strength and avoid unnecessary provocation.

(iii) We should avoid both in policy and propaganda any action that would give the Soviet people the impression that the West is implacably hostile whatever conciliatory gestures their leaders may make.

(iv) Though the recent Soviet gestures can only be regarded as a change of tactics, Western firmness over a prolonged period of time could alter Soviet foreign policy more radically by making it difficult for the Soviet Government to revert to their aggressive tactical methods.

ANNEX D

*The Death of Stalin and Sino-Soviet Relations*

1. So little is known of the relationship between China and the Soviet Union that it is not yet possible to do more than speculate on how it will be affected by Stalin’s death. The following paragraphs are no more than preliminary reflections.

2. The Chinese Communist Party achieved power in China largely by its own efforts. The relationship of China to the Soviet Union has been that of a junior partner rather than of a satellite. It is at present equally in the national interests of both countries that the alliance should continue. Sharing the same ideology, they pursue the same aims by the same means.

3. China has assumed the major undertaking of a five-year plan for economic reconstruction and until now has combined this with the burden of continuing the Korean war. Both of these depend on Soviet assistance; and even when the Korean war comes to an end Soviet support will still be needed in its aftermath. This dependence seems in itself sufficient reason to preclude any weakening in China’s loyalty to the alliance.

4. On the doctrinal plane, the claim made for Mao Tse-tung as a ‘Marxist-Leninist’ is relatively modest and not to be compared with Stalin’s position. It is that Mao is a practical exponent of existing theories; not an inventor of new theories as Lenin and Stalin were; and this practical contribution is restricted to the context of the Chinese Revolution.

5. The Chinese Revolution is sometimes represented, both by Russian and Chinese commentators as an example for other semi-colonial peoples. The inference appears to be that others, like Mao, can integrate the theory of Marxism-Leninism with the practical experience of their own national revolutions. The Chinese Revolution is thus the first of a series of other national revolutions which stem from the October Revolution, not itself a fountainhead from which other revolutions will follow. Thus, while China appears to have accepted willingly the Soviet “leadership of the world peace camp”, the Soviet Union appears, in its turn, to have acknowledged the special position of China in the Far East.[[15]](#footnote-15)

6. Since therefore there are at present so many forces contributing to the strength of the Sino-Soviet alliance and the personal relations between Mao and Stalin seem to have played only a minor part in these developments, it follows that the death of Stalin in itself should have little immediate effect on China’s internal and external policy, though this does not preclude a mutually agreed change of tactics or attitude to any particular problem or situation which may arise. An example of the latter is the new Communist approach to an armistice in Korea. China may have decided that she is unable to sustain for any prolonged period the double commitment of economic reconstruction and the Korean war; the Soviet Union may feel that this would be a suitable move in her new cold war tactics.

7. Despite all this, Stalin’s death could have important effects in the longer term. If, in the future, the unifying forces between the two countries were to be weakened, or if stresses and strains developed in the alliance, the absence of Stalin’s prestige and experience might make a major difference. Two possibilities come to mind. *First*, without Stalin’s authority, political skill and immense will-power, internal difficulties and dissensions inside the Soviet Union may be aggravated. In that case the feeling of weakness and uncertainly which could result would have far-reaching effects on the Kremlin’s relations with its satellites and China as well as with the outside world. *Second*, though it seems unlikely that Mao should have any idea of succeeding to Stalin’s position in the world Communist movement, he may on doctrinal matters be less ready to accept the authority or Stalin’s successors than he was to accept that of Stalin himself.

[TNA, PREM 11/540]

Keywords: post-war order, post-war USSR, Stalin’s death, China, Post-Stalin leadership

1. XIX Congress of the All Union Communist Party (b) / Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Moscow, 5–14 October 1953) – the first post-war party congress, at which representatives of the recently formed socialist countries in Europe and Asia took part. The name of the Party was changed to Communist Party of the Soviet Union. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The report of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) to the XIX Party Congress had been prepared by G.K. Malenkov; it was devoted to problems in the international environment facing the USSR, the development and problems of the socialist commonwealth, Anglo-American foreign policy, as well as the economic development of the USSR. For more detail see Gruliow L., ed. Current Soviet Policies: Documentary Record of the 19th Party Congress and Reorganization after Stalin’s Death. N.Y. 1953. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Doctors’ Plot – the last great purge, was never carried to completion. It began suddenly in January 1953 with charges levelled against doctors – the majority of whom were Jewish – that they had conspired with the aim of killing Soviet leaders. See: Brent J., Naumov V.P. Stalin's Last Crime: The Plot Against the Jewish Doctors, 1948–1953. N.Y. 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The text alludes to the First Deputy Chairmen of the Council of Ministers. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. G.K. Zhukov was in disgrace in the period 1946–1953 as a result of the so-called “Trophy Affair”, when the Marshal was deprived of all his key roles and posted as Commander of the Odessa military district. From 1948 he was moved to the command of the Urals military district. In 1953, as a result of the strained political struggles after the death of Stalin, he was recalled to the post of Deputy Minister of Defence of the USSR. He was one of the group involved in the arrest of L.P. Beria on 26 June 1953. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Negotiations for a peaceful settlement began on 26 June 1951 in the city of Kaesong, but after a break continued from October 1951 in the town of Panmunjom. The death of Stalin sped up the process of negotiations, and after two weeks the Soviet leadership presented a declaration admitting the error of the uncompromising negotiating style that had characterised the Soviet side until spring 1953. A ceasefire agreement was signed on the 27 June 1953. One of the cornerstones of the talks was the issue of prisoners of war, in so far as a significant section of prisoners from the North did not want to return; for a long time the North Korean leadership refused compromise on the question of repatriation. See: Agov A. North Korea's Alliances and the Unfinished Korean War" // The Journal of Korean Studies. Lanham. 2003. P. 225–262. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Hammarskjöld, Dag Hjalmar Agne Karl (1905–1961) – Swedish statesman and diplomat, delegate from Sweden at the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (1947–1953), Secretary General of the UN (1953–1961). Dag Hammarskjöld was put forward for the post of UN Secretary General after the resignation of Trygve Halvdan Lie and was elected on 10 April 1953. He was an active participant in talks with the People’s Republic of China and in the resolution of the Suez Crisis of 1956. He was an advocate of the extension of UN sovereignty. He was killed in a plane crash in Northern Rhodesia in 1962 while taking an active part in the resolution of the Congolese crisis of 1960–1965. For more detail on the election of Dag Hammarskjöld as the new Secretary General see Gaiduk I.V. Divided Together. The United States and the Soviet Union in the United Nations, 1945–1965. Washington, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The renewed negotiation on the German question manifested itself in the organisation of the meetings of Foreign Ministers of the four powers in the period from 25 January through to the 18 February 1954 in Berlin. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The “trade offensive” most likely refers to the Soviet proposal for the creation of a new international trade organisation, put forward at the Moscow economic conference in April 1952. This attempt, undertaken a year after the death of Stalin, had the aim of preventing the accelerating integration of Western countries who had declared trade to be a weapon of peaceful coexistence. See: Lipkin М.А. Sovetskii Soiuz i evropeiskaia integratsiia: seredina 1940-kh – seredina 1960-kh godov. М., 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Stalin's proclamation that trade was an instrument for peaceful coexistence was intended to slow down the process of integration of Western countries. See: Lipkin M.А. Sovetskiy Soyuz i evropeyskaya integratsiya: seredina 1940-kh – seredina 1960-kh godov. M., 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Before 1953, the American Embassy was situated in the Zholtovsky building on Mokhovoi Street. After numerous problems with the choice of a suitable building, it moved to a building on Novinsky Boulevard. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) – it was created in 1947 in Geneva by 19 member states of the UN. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This is a reference to the report of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) to the XIX Party Congress. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. One third of Malenkov’s report was devoted to comparing the economic development of Western nations and the states of the socialist camp. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. After the end of the Civil War in China in 1949, the Soviet leadership lent comprehensive support to the People’s Republic. The Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance, signed in Moscow on 14 February 1950, provided 300 million dollars of credit to the Chinese in order to get their economy on its feet again; it also allowed the USSR to form joint enterprises on Chinese territory where there was a complete absence of other sources of foreign capital. See: Voskresenskii А.D. Kitai i Rossiia v Evrazii. Istoricheskaia dinamika politicheskikh vzaimovliianii. М., 2004., Zinovꞌev G.V. Kitai i sverkhderzhavy. Istoriia vneshnei politiki KNR. SPb., 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)