Quarterly report on the Soviet Union, from British Ambassador to the Soviet Union, A. Gascoigne, to Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, Lord Salisbury[[1]](#footnote-1), dated 13 July 1953

CONFIDENTIAL

SOVIET UNION: QUARTERLY REPORT

APRIL-JUNE 1953

My Lord Marquess,

1.I have the honour to transmit to you herewith my report for the June quarter of 1953, for which I am indebted to Mr. First Secretary Brimelow[[2]](#footnote-2) and Mr. First Secretary Mennell.[[3]](#footnote-3)

2. This second quarter of 1953 has proved to be of vital interest to any observer of Soviet affairs. During the three months in question we have witnessed a certain loosening of the ice as regards Stalin’s methods and tactics; both internally and externally the new men at the helm in Russia have attempted to demonstrate their willingness: -

(a) to throw some sops to people of the Soviet Union;

(b) in so far as the external policy is concerned to reduce international tension by making a number of inexpensive, but in some cases overtly attractive, concessions to Western opinion.

3. The quarter is also extremely interesting from the standpoint of the setbacks which the Soviet Union have undoubtedly had as regards their administration of the Eastern Zone of Germany and East Berlin[[4]](#footnote-4). At the time of writing it is impossible to forecast the result of these incidents, but the Kremlin will now have to take a serious decision in the near future as to whether they should continue their present liberal policy in the Soviet Zone and the Eastern sector of Berlin, or on the other hand adopt severe measures to counter what appears to be widespread discontent amongst the German populace of these areas. At the end of the quarter their declared policy of liberalisation was being implemented.

4. On the Korean issue, despite Syngeman Rhee’s action in freeing some thousands of anti-Communist prisoners of war[[5]](#footnote-5) and defying the conclusion of an armistice, the Soviet Government were careful to play down any severe criticism of what had passed. Overtly they still appeared to want an armistice to be concluded and some oral statements to this effect by Soviet officials were made to members of the Diplomatic Corps in Moscow at the end of the quarter.

I have, &c.

A. GASCOIGNE

Enclosure

Against this background the new Government presented some important and at first sight far-reaching changes in foreign policy. There is little doubt that the Soviet Government used its influence in bringing about the final agreement of the Korean truce terms, although the initiative of reopening the negotiations appears to have come from the Chinese. The gratuitous renunciation of Soviet territorial claims on Turkey[[6]](#footnote-6) was an unsolicited declaration of a new policy. The appointment of civilian High Commissioners in Germany and Austria seemed to bring Soviet policy more into line with that which the other Occupation Powers had already been pursuing, and the concurrent modifications in detailed policy within Eastern Germany and in the attitude of the Soviet element in the Allied Council in Vienna supported this view. Even the bleakly unreasonable refusal of the Soviet Government to permit M. Malik to attend the Deputy Foreign Ministers’ meeting on the Austrian Treaty[[7]](#footnote-7), at a stage when the Kremlin must have known that the Western Powers were prepared to meet their objections regarding the abbreviated treaty and to negotiate the disputed articles of the original Draft Treaty, was sweetened, at least as far as the Austrian Government was concerned, by the accommodating Soviet attitude over the internal affairs of the Soviet Zone of Austria, and some quadripartite decisions taken by the Allied Council in Vienna.

The settlement of the Austrian and Korean questions were two specific “deeds” which President Eisenhower looked for in his speech of the 16th of April, replying to the repeated offer of the Soviet Government to solve all disputed international problems peacefully; Pravda broke precedent by publishing this speech in full on the 25th April[[8]](#footnote-8). Even when Syngeman Rhee unilaterally broke the agreed terms of the Prisoners of War Agreement, the Soviet Government showed no signs of being unwilling to continue to implement its “deed” on Korea, i.e., the conclusion of an Armistice at Panmunjom. Their reluctance to complete the “deed” on Austria appeared to emanate from their wish to keep any concession on Austria as a card to play in an endeavour to force concessions from the West on German reunification. They could, however, have claimed with some credence amongst smaller and neutral States, although they did not do so, that their renunciation of their claims on Turkey was a “deed” deserving of acknowledgement by the President of the United States.

The fact that President Eisenhower’s speech was printed in Pravda in full clearly indicated that the Soviet Government considered it to be of major international importance. Nevertheless, their comment on it, as the Pravda article of the 25th of April must be construed, was not encouraging of compromise, with the single exception of the reference to Korea. The Soviet Government, like the President, were being cautious and looking for deeds – in particular recognition of the Chinese Peoples’ Republic[[9]](#footnote-9). For the rest there was no change apparent in their attitude to Germany, Austria or the “national-liberation struggles” – of which, of course, Korea is in Communist eyes essentially one – although the tone of comment was sober.

The Soviet reaction, in the Pravda article of the 25th of May, on the other hand, to the Prime Minister’s speech on the 11th of May[[10]](#footnote-10) in the House of Commons, which also, by its verbatim report in Pravda showed that the Soviet Government judged it to be of major international importance, was more positive, and in particular highlighted the Prime Minister’s statement that the security of the Soviet Union was not irreconcilable with the freedom and safety of Western Europe. The Prime Minister’s suggestions for a guarantee to the Soviet Union on the lines of Locarno[[11]](#footnote-11) however, appeared to be intentionally misinterpreted, but his suggestion for a Four-Power meeting was welcomed. The article repeated that the Soviet Government would always be ready to consider “seriously and genuinely” proposals directed to ensure peace and the broadest economic and cultural relations between States and yet, apart again from the Korean question, there was no real indication that the Soviet Government would be prepared to make any major concession of substance should a high-level meeting take place. In particular did the article show the Soviet government to be sensitive to the idea of the Bermuda Conference. These exchanges though they may have had the appearance of clearing the air, left the atmosphere of mutual suspicion almost unmitigated. Meanwhile the articles in the Soviet press followed, albeit in rather milder form, the old arguments against the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, the European Defence Community[[12]](#footnote-12), the Schuman Plan[[13]](#footnote-13) and any other symptom of Western solidarity and unity.

The quarter ended with the most sensational of all the external events affecting the foreign policy of the Soviet Union: the spontaneous demonstrations in Eastern Germany and Berlin. These, following as they did the unrest in Czechoslovakia[[14]](#footnote-14), must have shown to the Soviet Government as to the rest of the world, on what flimsy popular support the influence of their satellite Governments in Europe is based. The reaction within the Soviet Union was great enough to set in motion the party propaganda machine from the Baltic States to Astrakhan. It seemed as if the Soviet Government feared that the hollowness of its democratic pretensions might even become apparent to its own citizens. Despite the cry of “provocateurs”, however, the line of peaceful co-existence and negotiated settlement of all international disputes was faithfully preserved, and the political concessions in Eastern Germany were continued, while the Government of the German Democratic Republic was still given Soviet support. These incidents must have put the Soviet Government on the defensive, and the reversion to the vigilance campaign, and the hardening of anti-American press comment, with particular regard to espionage, were evidence of this. Such credit as would have accrued to the International Communist movement as a result of the Italian elections[[15]](#footnote-15) was largely overshadowed by these happenings in East Germany.

In the light of events, it is uncertain whether the concessions on internal policy in Eastern Germany, attributed to Semyonov’s[[16]](#footnote-16) appointment as High Commissioner[[17]](#footnote-17), were designed as an attempt to forestall the disturbances, or whether they were part of the general disengagement policy aimed at making easier a compromise of the problem of the unification of Germany (incidentally confusing the issue before the West German electorate[[18]](#footnote-18)). Whichever is the correct interpretation, the continuation of these concessions after the disturbances, has been attributed by Soviet and East German spokesmen to their desire to bring about conditions in Germany favourable to reunification.

What is clear, however, is that in order to give themselves a quiescent period for consolidation within the Soviet Union, and perhaps in the satellites as well, some sort of détente in the international sphere was considered essential by the new Government. They appeared to wish to effect this without in any way basically altering the aims of their foreign policy; thus, while the pacific intentions of the Soviet Government may have become more immediately apparent and tangible, the Soviet meaning of “peaceful co-existence” has been reaffirmed.

[TNA, PREM 11/540]

Keywords: Post-war order, Post-war Eastern Europe, Post-war Western Europe, Post-Stalin leadership, Korea, Post-war Germany

1. Gascoyne-Cecil, Robert Arthur James (1893–1972) – 5th Marquess of Salisbury, British political figure, Conservative Member of the House of Commons (1929–1941), Leader of the House of Lords (1942–1945, 1951–1957), Lord President of the Council (1952–1957). He was an active proponent of imperialist policies in respect of the colonies. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Brimelow, Thomas (1915–1995) – Baron Brimelow, Prominent British diplomat, First Secretary of the Embassy of Great Britain in Moscow (1951–1954), Consul in Ankara (1954–1956), Consul in Washington (1960–1963), diplomatic representative of the Embassy of Great Britain in Moscow (1963–1966), Ambassador of Great Britain in Poland (1963–1966), Permanent Under Secretary at the Foreign Office (1963–1975). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mennel, Peter (1918–1981) – British diplomat, he held a range of senior posts among which were: First Secretary at the Foreign Office (1949–1951, 1954–1957), First Secretary at the British Embassy in Moscow (1951–1954), Ambassador of Great Britain to Ecuador (1970–1974). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The events of 16-17 June 1953 in the DDR: the uprising in Berlin that was put down by Soviet troops stationed in East Germany. Strikes connected with the raising of output norms in factories and the reduction of pay began from 9 June in the DDR. The resolution on the so-called “New Course” in the economy was published in the central Party newspaper of the DDR, *Neues Deutschland*, on 11 June. On 17 June Soviet troops entered a number of cities in the DDR in what was more a demonstration of force than a real military action. See: B. Khavkin. 17 iiuniia 1953 g. Iiunꞌskii krizis v GDR // Rossiia-Germaniia. Vekhi sovmestnoi istorii v kollektivnoi pamiati. Т. 3. ХХ vek. М., 2015. S. 223-232; Kh. Knabe. 17 iiuniia 1953 g. Narodnoe vosstanie v GDR// ibid. S. 233-243.  [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Syngman Rhee, unilaterally and in breach of all agreements, freed and helped to hide 25 thousand anti-Communist Korean prisoners of war; this complicated the process of peace negotiations. See: Uezersbi K. Voina v Koree 1950—1953 gg.: kholodnaia voina razgoraetsia // Kholodnaia voina. 1945—1963 gg. Istoricheskaia retrospektiva. М., 2005. S. 274-276. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Territorial claims on Turkey were made by Molotov to the Turkish Ambassador of the USSR, Salim Sarper on 7 June 1945 in relation to the Turkish border provinces of Kars and Ardahan. In the very same year, the Soviet Union refused to extend the 1925 Treaty of Friendship and Neutrality. See: Roberts G. Molotov: Stalin’s Cold Warrior. Washington, 2012, pp. 108–10. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The meeting of deputy foreign ministers took place in Washington from 10 to 14 July 1953. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. On 16 April 1953, Eisenhower gave a speech before the American Society of Newspaper Editors; it came to be dubbed the “Chance for Peace” or “Cross of Iron” speech. See *Public Papers of the President of the United States, Eisenhower* (1953), pp. 179–88. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Britain recognised the PRC as the government of China on 6 January 1950, and set up a charge d’affaires ad interim. The request to exchange ambassadors was turned down by the PRC. Formal full diplomatic relations between China and Britain were only established on 13 March 1972, and by the USA on 1 January 1979. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For a full exposition of the debate of 11 May see Hansard vol. 515 cc883-1004 (11 May 1953)// < <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1953/may/11/foreign-affairs#column_883> > [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The Locarno Agreements of 1925 between the Western powers and Germany guaranteed the integrity of their borders with Western Europe. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The Treaty on the European Defence Community (the Pleven plan) was signed on 27 May 1952 and proposed the creation of a unified European army drawn from six countries (France, FDR, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy and Luxemburg). It was submitted for ratification before the legislatures of these countries. However, on 30 August 1954, the National Assembly of France voted against it and the EDC treaty never came into force. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The Schuman Plan was the plan by the French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman for the integration of the coal and steel industries of Western European countries. First drafted out in May 1950, it was realised in 1951 in the form of the European Coal and Steel Community. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Strikes broke out in Czechoslovakia when, on 31 May 1953, the Government announced a monetary reform which meant price increases and wage reductions; the largest scale strike, involving possibly as many as 20 thousand people, took place at the Skoda factory in Pilsen. See Crampton, *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century,* p. 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In the elections which took place on 7 June 1953, the Communist Party won 143 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, which put them in second place after the Christian-Democrats who won 261 seats. See Kogan N. Political History of Postwar Italy. N.Y. 1966. p. 76-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Semyonov, Vladimir Semyonovich (1911–1992) - Soviet diplomat, political adviser to the Soviet Control Commission in DDR (1948–1953), Supreme Commissar of the USSR in Germany and Ambassador to the DDR (1953–1954), in the FDR (1978–1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Semyonov was appointed the Supreme Commissar after the dismissal in May 1953 of the Soviet Control Commission. See: Ostermann С.F. Uprising in East Germany 1953: The Cold War, the German Question, and the First Major Upheaval Behind the Iron Curtain. Budapest, 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. In September 1953 elections took place in the FDR. Victory was secured by a CDU/CSU bloc with Konrad Adenauer at the head; this maintained the status quo in the Government and kept the Social Democratic Party out of the leadership of the country. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)