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RECORD OF A CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE PRIME MINISTER AND
MR. ALEXANDER SOLZHENITSYN AT 1730 HOURS ON WEDNESDAY 11 MAY AT
10 DOWNING STREET

Present:

Prime Minister

Mr. Coles

Mr. Solzhenitsyn

Mrs. Solzhenitsyn

Interpreter

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Mr. Solzhenitsyn said that he had been surprised to find when he had left the Soviet Union for the West that the West was taking the same course as had the Soviet Union in the period of 65 years since the Revolution.

The Prime Minister said that she recalled him saying in his first TV interview in the West that we did not value freedom enough. She also recalled his statement in the United States to the effect that the West believed it had a free press but that in fact it had a censorship of fashion. She would like to hear his views on the psychology of Andropov and those around him.

Mr. Solzhenitsyn said that he had told a televised press conference today that the Western media did not open people's eyes to the realities of the world. But he would like to use this opportunity to say to the Prime Minister things which he could not say publicly.

A change of individuals in the Kremlin, so long as they were always Communists, meant nothing. When Brezhnev was disappearing from the scene, it was quite clear that his successor would bring

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nothing new. In six months Andropov had shown no sign of having really new ideas. To some extent the methods of Stalinism were being repeated. It was possible for a Soviet Leader to act in this way because the Russian people remembered that 60 million of their number had been killed in the past. The worst thing about the Politburo was not that they were mediocre. It was that they did not have the will or the possibility to choose their own course of action. The doctrine of Marxism, whether or not it was believed, acted on them like a mystical force and obliged them to act in certain ways. This would always be so until non-Communists came into power. We should also remember that when the Soviet Union acquired weapons, these were meant to be used.

The Prime Minister said that was the difference between the West and the East. We held weapons to defend ourselves, in the hope that they would not be used. But for the Soviet Union, armaments were a virility symbol.

Mr. Solzhenitsyn said that it was more than that. From the moment in 1919 when Lenin had created the Comintern, the declared Soviet goal had been the destruction of capitalism. From that moment, the Soviet state had moved on remorselessly, almost independently of its leaders. To understand the policy of the current government, it was necessary to remember that in the last resort the army controlled the government. The tendency to expand could not be stopped. A moment would come when the Russians would not be able to prevent their rockets being used. The Soviet economic situation was so difficult that it was practically impossible to correct it - unless the West continued to provide billions of aid. So the only course open to the Soviet Union was to start a war. He wanted the Prime Minister to remember this point in the coming months and years. Britain, Europe and the whole world would have to live through terrible, unprecedented experiences. The Western movement against nuclear arms might or might not influence government policy. But Andropov and those like him would never allow a balance of nuclear weapons to be restored. If Europe deployed INF missiles, the Soviet Union would put in place new and better ones. And if Europe did not deploy those missiles the Soviet Union would retain the advantage. The West had failed to

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notice the Soviet Union catching up in the arms race over the last twenty years. When he had told an American audience eight years ago that the United States no longer had an advantage in weapons, the press had said he was mad. It was now clear that at the time he spoke the Soviet Union already possessed an advantage.

The Prime Minister said that the disturbing feature of this analysis was the suggestion that the West could do nothing. We had to do something.

Mr. Solzhenitsyn said that this was correct. But the system would try to prevent her doing what was necessary. She was entering an Election Campaign. But only within certain limits was she free to choose her policies. We could not now achieve a balance in nuclear weapons - it was too late. But there were many ways to change a nation and a people. The situation in the Soviet Union was far more hopeless than the situation in Europe. Britain was a free, independent country. The Russians knew no such freedom. Even when they were sent to prison and isolation cells they continued fighting.

The terrible feature of current demonstrations in the West against nuclear weapons was that the demonstrators were opposed to any defence - they were prepared to surrender.

One of Britain's great moments was at hand. It was necessary to state openly that the country was in a most dangerous situation. Although there was no war today, the situation might be worse than that of 1940. The young did not seem to be prepared to defend their country.

The Prime Minister said that our young people were ready to do this. They had gone eight thousand miles to defend the Falklands. There was a new pride in Britain.

Mr. Solzhenitsyn said that Britain and Europe had lost not just the chance to achieve a nuclear balance but also a conventional balance. He did not believe that there would be a nuclear war. For a nuclear threat was sufficient to paralyse an adversary.

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But if Britain could begin to feel these dangers as acutely as in 1914 there could be a quick growth of courage and of conventional armaments which would bring the country to a point where it could resist.

The Prime Minister asked whether, if we increased our conventional armaments, the Soviet Union would not simply increase their own? Mr. Solzhenitsyn replied that there were two aspects to this question. First, the Communists were very powerful but they were also very afraid of courageous resistance. He had personally experienced this many times and he was one feeble individual. If they saw that the situation in Britain had changed and that we were if necessary prepared to sacrifice and die, they would not touch Britain but would instead consider moves against other countries. Secondly, the Communists found it easier to increase nuclear weapons rather than conventional weapons because they already lacked an adequate labour force - an expansion in the armed forces would have serious effects on the economic life of the country.

Britain was therefore placed to take up a special position, as its tradition dictated. The world was accustomed to seeing firmness and courage from Britain. We could not depend on help from the United States and our other allies. The Soviet Union would start a war at five or six different places, over a period of several weeks. The United States would send troops to first one place, then another, and would find it had no reserves. Moreover, the United States would always give preference to Israel if that country were in mortal danger. Our European allies were too weak to rely upon.

To sum up, the West had lost the nuclear race. Balance would never be restored. But if the West could re-discover spiritual firmness, the struggle could continue for a long time, though he could not predict the outcome.

He had a specific point to make. Britain and the West neglected some of its most important allies. He referred to the slave peoples

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of the Soviet Union and China. Britain had committed some errors and had even committed worse errors than the rest of the world. When Mao Tse Tung had come to power in China, the UK had been one of the first to recognise his regime. The same thing had happened with the Cambodian government. And during the Russian Civil War Britain had given little help to the Russian army.

There was a further point which he raised, not as a reproach but as a lesson. In 1945 Britain had handed over to the Soviet Union people who did not want to go there and many of whom had been killed.

All Western countries accepted the view that the Communist government represented the Soviet Union. He did not recall a single occasion when Britain or America had stated that they were for the people and against the government. The Prime Minister commented that we had often said that we had nothing against the people of the Soviet Union. We maintained contacts with Eastern Europe, took an interest in Hungary's economic experiment and were surprised that the Polish experience was not spreading. She often stated that we needed strong defences both to protect our own freedom and also to give a beacon of hope to people who are not free.

Mr. Solzhenitsyn said that in order to save the West and in our own interests, we must make allies of the slave people in the Soviet Union. We had missed an opportunity in the Second World War. When the German army was advancing into Russia, millions of Russians had thought that this meant the end of Communism and they had started to go over to the German side. The German army could have liberated the Soviet Union from Communism but Hitler was stupid and did not use this weapon.

It was not enough to show sympathy for the Soviet people. We had to find practical ways of helping. We should use every Russian who managed to get out of the Soviet Union.

There was a war in Afghanistan. For various reasons the Western countries did not have the courage to intervene and give freedom to the Russian prisoners. The Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan did not

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want to fight. If they were promised that any of them who deserted from the Soviet army would be free we would quickly have several regiments of soldiers. Afghanistan was a precursor of what would soon happen elsewhere even in Europe.

It was necessary to work out and proclaim the policy he was advocating as soon as possible. The West must give the Soviet and Chinese people a chance to save themselves. He knew that even if she wanted to, the Prime Minister could not proclaim this policy tomorrow.

The Prime Minister said that she understood this message but she still found it hard to appreciate why the Polish experience, which she regarded as a fundamental challenge to Communism, had not spread.

Mr. Solzhenitsyn said that he would make two observations. This challenge to Communism had happened in Poland because it was there that the strongest church had been maintained. In Poland, the Communists had had only 37 years to fight against the church but in Russia they had had 65 years. Solidarity did not grow out of Socialism or a trade union movement. The trade union label was just a pseudonym - Solidarity was a religious and national resistance of the Polish people.

The second point he wished to make was that the Polish experience had deprived the West of willpower. We had started with hopes that what had happened there would recur in Hungary and then the Soviet Union. That was a dangerous approach. He had been an optimist throughout his life but after he had come to the West he had become a pessimist. He had always believed that the West would not let Communism expand and that that political system would be ended. Now he considered that Communism would expand even more and last longer. He even had to admit, with horror, that Communism might conquer the world. See, for example, the number of countries conquered by Communism in the last ten years. But perhaps liberation would begin where this system had first been imposed - in the countries of Eastern Europe. This, however, could only happen if

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the people were ready to fight and resist.

The Prime Minister asked how we could get the message through to the people of the Soviet Union. Mrs. Solzhenitsyn said that they listened eagerly to the Russian service of the BBC and 'Voice of America'. Mr. Solzhenitsyn said that we should distribute leaflets in Afghanistan saying "This is your permit to the free West. Your freedom will be guaranteed and, if you wish, you can serve in a free Russian army". We should not be afraid to send instructors and other help to Afghanistan.

The same problems and the same aims applied to China. Eighty million Chinese were about to be betrayed by the West.

There would never be friendship between Western and Soviet leaders. Relations were bad anyway. So we should take advantage of the situation openly and occupy the best possible position for a struggle. This would require first, an increase in firmness and courage and in conventional arms; secondly, intervention in all countries where the Communists were trying to take power; thirdly, the creation of bases everywhere for a free Russian army.

The Communists would then start to retreat. There was no other way.

He had one more specific point to make. He believed deeply in Britain's firmness when Britain was alone. Our allies usually made us weaker. The Commonwealth was a millstone around our necks. We would not be able to keep this heritage and it would not save us. The Prime Minister said that the Commonwealth did give us opportunities to convince non-aligned countries that the West was its true friends and that they were in danger of being absorbed by the new imperialism of the Soviet Union. Communism was at work in Central and South America. The United States was at present losing the propaganda battle there. But it was one of the most generous countries in the world. If there was instability, we would depend on America so we must all stand together.

/ Mr. Solzhenitsyn

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Mr. Solzhenitsyn said that we should never fall into the American trap of believing that we were dealing with Russian imperialism rather than Soviet imperialism. There was no Russian imperialism. If every nationalist government came to power in Moscow, it would withdraw all Russian troops from abroad.

The conversation ended at 1830 hours.

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