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Sept. 9. 1983

Dear Margaret,

Thank you very much for asking me to yr. most interesting seminar. It was most stimulating thing, of course, I did not agree with everything that was said - even things they know much more than I on the detailed subjects raised. I attach my thoughts on some of the matters raised, particularly that on Mr Donnelly's argument that the system ~~might~~<sup>would</sup> collapse if it suffered a nuclear attack.

Yours ever  
Hugh

## Prime Minister

May I make the following points about our extremely interesting discussion of yesterday:

1. Your special attention to Donnelly's remark about the USSR being unable to stand a nuclear exchange: in my opinion, you cannot count on this. The Russian people might rally round the current leader with the same (or greater) patriotism as they did around Stalin in 1941 even though Stalin hid (shattered) for ten days after the German attack; though he had had murdered millions of innocent men and women; and though he was known by his entourage to have refused to listen to warning of the attack from British, American and his own sources. Donnelly may be right; but he cannot be sure of it. 1941 was an opportunity for the overthrow of Stalin and Communism. But it did not happen.

2. One consequence of an economic system in which (a) innovation is feared for political reasons but in which (b) stagnation seems intolerable, is surely likely to be expansion abroad.

This is perhaps the more probable <sup>since</sup> ~~is~~ (a) the growth of Soviet power and influence abroad is important for propaganda on the domestic front; (b) there is

/a residual

a residual belief in the expectation that Communism is destined to spread - however much we may disagree on the importance of 'ideology'; and, (c) it also fits in with Russian nationalist ambitions. Thus we may see what one US professor, Bialer of Colombia, ~~says~~<sup>describes</sup> as the unlimited expansion abroad of a system which is declining domestically.

Absurd (as Professor Nove said sharply) but in the 20th century the absurd is always still possible. Indeed, one of the omissions in our meeting was a consideration of the extent to which the Soviet is daily waging a twilight war against the West for power and influence through all sorts of surrogates - not only the Cubans: e.g. picking on a useful 3rd world "freedom movement" and sustaining it by arms, propaganda etc. We are not exactly at war with the USSR, true, but we are very definitely not at peace with her in the sense, say, that we were with Russia before 1914.

3. I think the papers underestimated ideology. May I repeat: the eleven members of the politburo are not just the worried leaders of a huge nation; nor simply chief conspirators on an extraordinary scale; they are the high priests of a cult to which a hundred foreign communist parties look for guidance and perhaps as many states.

/These men

*after all*

These men are ~~are~~ conscious ~~are~~ that many governments of new states look to Russia as a country which, despite horrible injustice, has swiftly industrialised and armed itself well, not knowing (or not caring to recall) that Russia before 1917 was a formidable industrial power already (her rate of increase of production in steel was higher between 1870 and 1914 than in 1921 - 40).

4. The domestic dislocation and contradiction of Russia were well brought out: but there is also an international contradiction. Thus the threat of "imperialism" is assumed to be as great as ever; but Soviet power is also maintained to be greater than ever too. Both points of view are needed for domestic propaganda.

5. The Schultz doctrine ("pluralism"): the right attitude is surely to assume an olympian confidence that in the end the nations of the Soviet empire will become free (even if, as Professor Nove said, the destruction of western influence in the Civil War and the purges took Russia back a generation or two). The tone (to which reference was made by Archie Brown) should be Goethe-like, shall we say, not House of Commons. As to details:

/the extension

(i) the extension of broadcasting to the non Russian peoples of the Soviet empire should be re-considered. I think that, before the election, I wrote to you that Mr. Shakespeare, the president of Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe, told me that ten years ago President Nixon offered to pay for this extension of the BBC service if we could not afford it - and they might agree to do so again. (Tony Parsons remembers this). Such broadcasts should of course be very balanced but they should at least show that Britain recognises that there are such places as Lithuania, Latvia, Georgia etc., with historic pasts and perhaps futures;

(ii) a policy of economic measures should not be discounted, in my view, quite as lightly as Michael Kaser did. Dr. Amman recognised (in the last paragraph of his paper) this to be a matter of judgement, not expertise. Western public opinion may not support high defence budgets, if it turns out that we are making useful economic or technological contributions to the strength of the USSR. Where the proposed measures can be easily circumvented, they should of course not be implemented. But where they might be implemented without evasion they should be seriously examined. Each item (high technology, sporting contacts, grain, credits, cultural visits) could be separately examined - if

/only

only because the matter is bound to be raised again as a possible substitute for war after the next Soviet outrage (invasion of Iran? troops in Poland?);

(iii) an articulate, intelligent and subtle projection of the western case should be reconsidered, again, along the lines of the paper put forward by the C.R.D. under the chairmanship of Eldon Griffiths in 1980, and as also suggested to you by George Urban, Leonard Schapiro etc. The aim is presumably to help three clientèles: <sup>public opinion in</sup> the West; <sup>in</sup> the Soviet bloc; the 3rd world: [NB George Urban, who may soon become head of Radio Free Europe, has returned to this theme].

6. Summit meetings. Personally I cannot see the point of you or indeed anyone else meeting Andropov. When has such a meeting been a success? It would have been better if even the wartime Big Three meetings had not occurred. Stalin did bring himself to go abroad once (by train) to Teheran and Roosevelt, to make up for this concession, stayed in the Soviet embassy. The result was the abandonment of Poland. Even Churchill was fooled personally a bit by Stalin, Roosevelt far more. The argument that in that way you would get a picture of what Andropov is like is unconvincing - Stalin ("Uncle Joe") and

/ Khrushchev

Khrushchev clearly put over quite false pictures of their true selves. Who would have guessed from the jokey Nikita Khrushchev that Christians were treated worse by him than even under Stalin after 1945? Nor do I think that Andropov would be influenced much if he visited the West and e.g. stayed in Claridges as Bulganin and Khrushchev did. He would continue to believe what he wants to believe. The trouble with summits is that they give rise to inflated expectations. *However, I know this is a minority view.*

7. Soviet war dead: the figures are not exaggerated, it seems. But what has been neglected is the question of how they all died - many of them were victims of Stalin as much as Hitler. See, for example, the paragraphs recently published by Count Nikolai Tolstoy in his book Stalin's Secret War.

(attached)

Hugh Thomas  
September 9, 1983

Possibly the most extraordinary example of the 'Russian mythos' is one which survives largely intact today, even among some reputable historians. This is to the effect that much is owed to the Soviet

regime because the Russians lost an estimated twenty million war dead. These enormous figures inflicted feelings of acute guilt on Allied leaders and public then and since, and are still used by Soviet spokesmen as credit when attempting to extract concessions from the West.<sup>7</sup> The origin of the specific figure usually cited appears obscure. In 1947 pro-Soviet writers in the West were accepting a figure of seven-million Soviet war dead.<sup>8</sup> In 1945 Mikoyan boasted that victory had been achieved with 'the least possible losses'. Later, when more precise figures became available – or when it was appreciated that more, not less, blood was advantageous – M. Suslov claimed (in 1965) that twenty million had perished.<sup>9</sup> But even this figure appears to have been an underestimate. A careful analysis of the first post-war census, that of 1959, revealed that something like twenty-five million more people died in the war years than normally would have been expected. In addition the projected birth-rate was down by twenty million; a figure to be accounted for by a possible wartime decline, and greatly inflated infant mortality.<sup>10</sup> It seems that, in all, a staggering total of not less than thirty million Russians died in the war years, if we make the modest assumption that at least a quarter of expected births took place.

This figure may be compared with the numbers dead from all causes as a result of the First World War. That war lasted about the same length of time and involved roughly the same number of Russian soldiers. The total death-rate was 1,660,000.<sup>11</sup> How can one account for this amazing discrepancy? Fire-power was much greater in the Second World War, but despite this, casualties in most theatres tended to be considerably lower than in the previous conflict, with its bloody struggles fought often at very close quarters. The British Empire, for example, lost nearly a million men in the First War, and less than a quarter of that number in the Second. But the best comparison must surely be that with the Wehrmacht, which needless to say fought the same battles over the same period of time and with much the same numbers. By 30 November 1944 the German Army in Russia had lost 1,419,000 men killed, and another 907,000 missing. It seems probable that about two and a half million Germans in all were killed in battle on the Eastern Front.<sup>12</sup>

The number of Russian troops killed on the Front is not known with any degree of precision. The Soviet authorities were little concerned with the fate of the individual soldier, and no record appears to have been preserved of losses incurred. During the war Stalin

Nikolai Tolstoy Stalin's Secret War  
(London, 1981)

quoted obviously doctored statistics designed to minimize Soviet casualties, and afterwards only informed guesses could be made. A Soviet demographer has estimated that about 7,500,000 soldiers were killed in battle or died of wounds, which is perhaps as close to the truth as we can hope to get.<sup>13</sup> This leaves 22,500,000 civilian deaths unaccounted for, but it will be best to examine the military casualties separately.

How can it be explained that three Russians died for every German soldier killed? Firstly, there were the prisoners-of-war. Of five and a half million Russians taken by the Germans, more than three million had by 1945 been murdered or died through neglect and ill-treatment.<sup>14</sup> Though the major blame must clearly fall on the Nazi butchers responsible, not much less should be accorded to the Soviet regime which collaborated in the crime. By refusing to accede to the Geneva Convention on Prisoners-of-War or to collaborate with the International Red Cross, the Soviet Government (as it well knew) effectively sentenced its citizens to death.<sup>15</sup> German ill-treatment of Russian prisoners did not come about as a response to Soviet brutality, as it was a policy already decided upon before the invasion.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, had Soviet Russia accepted the provisions of international law in this matter, it may be fairly questioned whether Hitler would have been able to continue with his policy of extermination of Russian prisoners. He was not unduly concerned with legal procedures, still less with humanitarian considerations. But had the Soviet authorities treated German prisoners in a civilized manner, pressure for Germany to respond in kind must (the evidence suggests) have had considerable, if not irresistible, effect.

If the three million Russians who died in captivity are deducted from the the estimated total of 7,500,000 total military war dead, the USSR still lost around two of her soldiers for each German. This can only be attributed to the Red Army's barbarous manner of waging war, in which lives counted as nothing in the succession of blundering offensives conducted by Stalin's General Staff in 1941-2. These tactics included the use of penal battalions. Like virtually everything else in the Soviet state, this was a concept originated by the resourceful Lenin. On 20 October 1919 he ordered ten thousand of the Petrograd 'bourgeoisie' to be dispatched to the front ('machine-guns to the rear of them, a few hundred shot') and driven against the White lines.<sup>17</sup>

The NKVD collected droves of 'enemies of the people' from their

prisons and camps, and sent them off, untrained and frequently unarmed, to the battlefield. There, with NKVD machine-gunners crouching safely behind them, they were hurled in waves against German defensive positions. On occasion they were deprived of camouflaged uniforms, so as to draw enemy fire. Their most useful task was the clearance of minefields: driven on in extended ranks, they moved slowly forward until they had blown up every mine. The head of the Soviet Military Mission in Britain, General Ratov, actually declined an offer of British mine-detectors, explaining blandly that 'in the Soviet Union we use people'.<sup>18</sup> In a typical attack on a German position one penal battalion lost 500 of its 1,500 men. They had one rifle to every three men; the well-armed NKVD men behind them confined their role in the battle to killing all their own wounded. It is impossible to know how many 'soldiers' were killed in this way, but the number must run into hundreds of thousands. A particularly unpleasant aspect was the frequent inclusion of women in punitive units.<sup>19</sup>

Apart from losses incurred by this and other wasteful forms of fighting, where losses were considered immaterial provided objectives were attained, there were other unusual causes of casualties. Svetlana Stalin tells how Beria

carried out the abominable liquidation of whole army units, at times very large ones, who, during the swift German advance into the Ukraine and Byelorussia, had found themselves cut off from their own lines, and who later, against frightful odds, had found their way back.<sup>20</sup>

Actions like this, frequently resulting in minor battles between NKVD and regular troops, continued until the end of the war.<sup>21</sup>

Thus the disproportionate scale of Soviet military casualties can readily be accounted for, but what of civilian losses, totalling as they did some 22,500,000 lives? Large numbers perished as a direct or indirect result of German actions. Possibly a quarter of a million civilians were killed during operations against Soviet partisans, and some 750,000 Russian Jews were massacred at Babi Yar and elsewhere. A further million people may have died in the Ukraine in 1941-2, when the Germans made no attempt to feed the urban population. Yet another million civilians could have perished during the siege of Leningrad and other cities. Finally, up to half a million Russians died working as slave-labour in the Reich.<sup>22</sup> Thus

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about four million Russian civilian deaths may be laid at the door of the Germans. A further death toll must have resulted from the 'scorched earth' policy pursued by both sides when retreating.

However generously these figures are interpreted, there is still a residue of some ten to fifteen million Russian corpses to account for. Any calculation remotely approaching exactitude is clearly impossible, but it is not difficult in general terms to account for this fantastic mortality.

Firstly, there were the losses incurred during Stalin's invasions of Poland and Finland in 1939-40. The first campaign resulted in minuscule casualties,<sup>23</sup> but in Finland they were enormous. Khrushchev believed that a million men died there, though the true figure may be about a quarter of that number.

Secondly, Soviet policy in compelling the evacuation of large sections of the population suspected of sympathy for the invaders resulted in widespread epidemics throughout the countryside.<sup>24</sup>

Thirdly, the NKVD conducted widespread purges behind the lines throughout the war, particularly in reoccupied territories, their victims being counted in unknown thousands or, very likely, millions. This culminated in a regular war against Ukrainian nationalists and other opponents of the regime.<sup>25</sup> About 1,600,000 people were deported from among the Crimean Tartars, Caucasian Republics and Volga Germans. Perhaps another million Germans from elsewhere in the Soviet Union underwent the same fate, and a similar number of Ukrainians.<sup>26</sup> Finns from Soviet Karelia had already been deported *en masse* in 1939.

Fourthly came unprecedented mortality in the greatly swollen camps of GULAG. The normal death-rate, terrible as it was, increased enormously through difficulties caused by the expanded prison population and other wartime aggravations of conditions.<sup>27</sup> To this must be added the myriads exterminated in prison massacres such as that at L'vov, when being evacuated eastwards to escape the German advance, and in the camps themselves.<sup>28</sup> A former prisoner, who with his comrades conducted a rough-and-ready estimate, reckoned that seven million GULAG inmates were slaughtered in the first year of the war.<sup>29</sup> There is no means of checking such figures, but nothing in the history of GULAG suggests it need be exaggerated. Fifthly comes the category of Russians who, as prisoners-of-war, deported slave-labour or refugees, fell into German hands and were subsequently repatriated. A total of some 5,500,000 were recovered,

of whom 2,272,000 were obligingly handed back by the British and Americans.<sup>30</sup> Thousands were massacred on arrival, whilst the overwhelmingly majority of the remainder disappeared and died in forced-labour camps.<sup>31</sup>

It will readily be seen that all this mortality accounts without difficulty for the missing statistic of Russian losses. However one assesses the proportion, it is clear that casualties directly attributable to the Germans account for only a third, or at most half, of Soviet overall losses in manpower in the years 1939-45, even if we discount the heavy responsibility that must rest on the Soviet Government for the military and political blunders of 1941-2, and the fate of the prisoners-of-war in Germany. Most Russians killed at that time died in the invasion of Finland and in the subsequent war of the NKVD against the civil and military population of the USSR.

It was this government and the political system it enforced which aroused the enthusiastic loyalty of so many in the West. Though much of what was going on in Soviet Russia was hidden from view more than enough information was accessible to those who wished to know. The truth was available in countless books and articles written by fugitives from the USSR, from thousands of Soviet citizens and (after 1941) Poles in the West, from Western visitors such as Malcolm Muggeridge, Eugene Lyons and Andrew Smith, and even from published Soviet sources. What was glaringly obvious to Arthur Koestler and George Orwell might have been equally so to Louis Aragon, J. D. Bernal or Lillian Hellman.<sup>32</sup> How did it happen that thousands of intelligent people inveigled or encouraged millions less intellectually endowed into blind admiration of mass murder, torture and slavery?

At the time, support for the Soviet Union often took the form of neo-religious adulation, in which truth and Stalin's communism were identified and hostile criticism simply heresy. The continually accruing mass of evidence revealing it for what it really was had to be exorcized as an unscrupulous challenge to faith, and its opponents excoriated in a shrill vein of heavy-handed sarcasm which owed much, in appearance at least, to Lenin's inimitable style of polemic. With hindsight, apologists for the generation of Marxists and fellow-travellers claim that their faith was the inevitable reaction to an era of triumphant Fascism, faced in the West by bankrupt politicians bent on appeasement or betrayal. Only the Soviet Union and the international Communist movement stood firm against the

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