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10 DOWNING STREET

LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

16 January, 1989.

Dear Stephen,

CALL BY THE SOVIET AMBASSADOR

The Soviet Ambassador called on the Prime Minister this evening to deliver an oral message from Mr. Gorbachev. This said in essence that, because of pressing matters at home, Mr. Gorbachev is unable to travel abroad for the time being. But he wants to reinstate his postponed visit to the United Kingdom, and will propose dates when possible. The Prime Minister expressed understanding, and said that Mr. Gorbachev would be welcome whenever he chose to come.

The Soviet Ambassador said that he had seen Mr. Gorbachev in Moscow on 12 January for a long talk. Mr. Gorbachev had asked him to convey his gratitude for the understanding shown by the Prime Minister for the postponement of his planned visit to the United Kingdom in December. That had underlined the extent to which a good basis of personal trust had been established between them. Mr. Gorbachev had recalled several times during the talk their original meeting at Chequers, and how the Prime Minister had immediately seen and understood the significance of the thoughts which he was then beginning to develop about the future of the Soviet Union and a new structure of international relations. Since then, she had shown that she not only understood them, but believed in them and wanted to encourage them. Mr. Gorbachev had also read with great interest the Prime Minister's assessment of his United Nations speech, and was looking forward to discussing with her the issues raised in it. He always found his talks with the Prime Minister useful, important and interesting, and believed that Soviet/British relations carried a special importance in the broader East/West relationship.

The Ambassador continued that Mr. Gorbachev had asked him to say very frankly that, due to circumstances in the Soviet Union, he had found it necessary to curtail his plans for foreign visits. At the moment, all these visits were up in the air. With so many issues fighting for his attention in the Soviet Union ("I am floating on the waves"), he

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simply could not get away. But he wished to emphasise that the postponement of his visit to the United Kingdom was just a technical hold-up and had no political significance. He had a great desire to hold a further meeting with the Prime Minister, and it would certainly take place. He had also wanted the Ambassador to express his sincere gratitude for the aid from the United Kingdom for Armenia.

The Ambassador continued that Mr. Gorbachev had initially been thinking in terms of a visit at the end of January. But the internal situation in the country led him to conclude that it was simply not possible to go abroad at present. He had to cope with the final stages of Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, with the Elections to the Supreme Soviet, with the Moscow Party Conference, with the continuing problems with the nationalities, and with reconstruction in Armenia. He very much hoped that the Prime Minister would understand this. As soon as he was able to consider foreign travel again, he would consult the Prime Minister immediately about dates, and a visit to the United Kingdom would be very high on the list. Any speculation about his plans to visit other countries - France, China, Germany, Cuba - should be disregarded. He was not at present able to find dates for any of them.

The Prime Minister said that of course she was disappointed that Mr. Gorbachev would not be coming in the near future. She always looked forward to her talks with him. They were consistently the most profound and challenging of the discussions she held with other Heads of Government. She knew that The Queen would be no less disappointed. But the most important thing was that Mr. Gorbachev's views should prevail within the Soviet Union. She fully understood the need to deal with pressing internal problems. Things at home must come first. She was confident that Mr. Gorbachev would continue along the path on which he had embarked, and not give up. She knew he would come to the United Kingdom as soon as he could, and we would do our best to fall in with his plans. The Ambassador should convey to Mr. Gorbachev both her disappointment and her full understanding. At the same time, he should give her warm good wishes to him and to Mrs. Gorbachev. The Ambassador said that he would certainly do this. He was convinced that the visit would take place, and his personal guess was it would be in the early Spring.

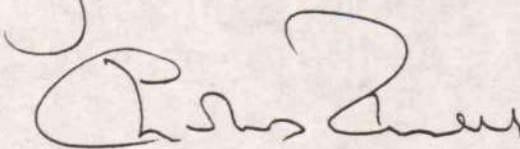
It was agreed that we would say to the press that the Soviet Ambassador saw the Prime Minister tonight at 10 Downing Street on his return from Moscow to deliver an oral message from Mr. Gorbachev dealing with a number of matters. The message confirmed Mr. Gorbachev's desire to pay an official visit to the United Kingdom, for which dates would be fixed when possible. The Prime Minister said that Mr. Gorbachev would be welcome whenever he came. We shall elaborate on this by adding that it is clear that Mr. Gorbachev has many pressing commitments at home, and that a visit is not to be expected in the near future.

As he was leaving, the Ambassador said that

Mr. Kamentsev, the Deputy Prime Minister who accompanied the Prime Minister on her visit to Georgia, would be visiting Britain from 6 to 9 February for talks on economic and trade matters. The Prime Minister said that she would do her best to see him.

Zamyatin obviously came in some trepidation about his likely reception. He made no bones about Gorbachev's current difficulties and heavy preoccupations at home. It is hard to judge whether these are genuine or whether he was simply covering himself for having led us to expect an early visit. He laid on the excuses fairly thick. Equally, on the way out, he said he had been surprised by how openly and frankly Gorbachev had spoken of his difficulties. The Prime Minister's view is that we should accept the account at face value and show ourselves entirely realxed about the dates of a visit.

I am sending copies of this letter to Bill Heseltine at Buckingham Palace and to Sir Robin Butler.

yours sincerely,


C.D. Powell

Stephen Wall, Esq.,
Foreign and Commonwealth Office.