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MR. COLES

SOVIET PRISONERS IN AFGHANISTAN

We discussed this subject last week, and I was going to talk to the Prime Minister about it. In the event, we were overtaken by more pressing matters.

The proposition, which is supported by some Members of Parliament and Russian emigre organisations, is that we should arrange to bring to Britain some of the Soviet deserters now in the hands of the Afghan rebels. The motive would be threefold. First, humanitarian: second, to encourage further defections: third, to publicise the horrors of service in the Red Army by putting the defectors on television.

The supporters of this plan have been complaining of the negative attitude of the FCO. Two of them called on me the other day (see copy of record attached): there have been one or two critical articles in the press: and Count Nikolai Tolstoy has now written to the Prime Minister and to the Foreign Secretary (copies of his letter also attached). Obviously we should coordinate the Prime Minister's and the Foreign Secretary's reply to Nikolai Tolstoy and to the organisations in question. This problem, if not handled correctly, could give the Prime Minister some trouble with her own supporters.

I am certainly not opposed in principle to the notion of embarrassing the Soviet Union over their performance in Afghanistan and encouraging further defection from their armed services. If some of the Russians came here, the emigre organisations would almost certainly look after them and they would not be a financial burden on the country. They would be unlikely to have any intelligence value. So far as I gathered from Mr. Miller, they are all other ranks.

I see two snags. The lesser one is that British Government involvement in such an exercise would run counter to our policy of trying to build a more businesslike relationship with the Soviet Union. This could be overcome to some extent by ourselves keeping out of it and leaving it to the emigre organisations to make all the arrangements. They would do so with a word of encouragement, I have no doubt.

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The second snag, which is much greater, and which would apply equally to our involvement or to that of private organisations, is the attitude of the Pakistan Government. In practical terms, the Russians could only be brought out of Afghanistan to the West through Pakistan and with the connivance of the Pakistan Government. By the same token, if they were smuggled out without the knowledge of the Pakistan Government and subsequently appeared on British television, the Pakistanis would know what had happened. The last thing Pakistan wants is further trouble with the Soviet Union. From their track record as described to me by Mr. Miller, my guess is that, if we or the emigre organisations approach the Pakistan Government, their reaction might well be to stall and then to pass the word to the Afghan rebels to shoot all their prisoners so that the problem for them would go away. This would, apart from any humanitarian considerations, have the effect of drying up any further desertions from the Soviet armed forces.

A slightly less risky way of approaching the Pakistanis might be to use a Moslem Third World country, such as Egypt or Saudi Arabia, to sound them out. Even this would carry a degree of risk and I doubt if any such country would have the guts to stand up to the tempest from the Soviet Union if everything came out into the open.

The Prime Minister might wish to discuss when she has a moment. There are certain attractions in the idea, but the risks of it all going wrong are heavy.



A.D. PARSONS  
8 November 1983

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FROM: M StE BURTON, SAD  
DATE: 28 OCTOBER 1983

Copies to: Private Secretary  
PS/Lady Young  
PS/PUS  
Mr Giffard  
Mr Donald  
Soviet Department  
PUSD  
MVD  
Sir A Parsons, No 10  
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NOTE FOR THE RECORD

AFGHANISTAN: SOVIET PRISONERS

1. A Mr Peter Young of the Adam Smith Institute called at his own request on Sir Anthony Parsons at No 10 on 26 October to discuss the possibility of Soviet prisoners/deserters being exfiltrated to the West. He was accompanied by Mr George Miller of NTS, The Russian emigré organisation, who did most of the talking.
2. The essence of the case made by the visitors was that HMG... should agree to provide political asylum for the Soviet deserters at present in the hands of the Mujahadeen, mainly in Afghanistan. They drew attention to the publicity advantages that could be gained, for example by television appearances. They admitted that most of the current potential deserters were of low calibre but argued that if a reliable channel of escape could be set up Soviet officers of greater importance might in time start to avail themselves of it. They said that previous approaches had been made through Lord Cranborne MP of the ASC and Sir Peter Blaker MP as well as during a call Mr Miller had made at our Embassy in Islamabad, but hitherto no action had been taken. They had therefore decided to approach the Prime Minister's office. Mr Miller left behind a memorandum addressed to Sir A Parsons (copy attached).
3. Mr Miller said that in the course of several visits to Pakistan and Afghanistan he had talked to six Soviet defectors as he described them (three of whom had deserted from the Soviet Army and three had fallen into Mujahadeen hands in other ways);

one had since been shot by the Mujahadeen. He thought that there were about 50 other Soviet prisoners in Mujahadeen hands who also wanted political asylum in the West; about half of them were Russians and the others Ukrainians and soldiers of mixed blood. Together he thought the total of Soviet prisoners amounted, according to a US estimate, to about 200. An early decision was essential ~~as~~<sup>or</sup> more lives would be lost.

4. All these prisoners had poor prospects. All the fundamentalist groups tended to give prisoners short shrift although Hikmatyar was thought to hold a number for purposes of an eventual swop with the Soviet authorities for his own men in their hands. Younis Khalis had also taken some prisoners. The nationalist/moderate groups tended to have a better understanding of the propaganda benefits of holding prisoners and it was they who had handed over the Soviet soldiers currently in the custody of the Swiss authorities. But in general the Mujahadeen were cautious about bringing prisoners across the frontier into Pakistan out of regard for their relations with the Pakistan authorities. Indeed when they knew that the Pakistanis had discovered the whereabouts of one of the prisoners he was either shot or sent back across the border. As for the attitude of the Pakistan Government on the one occasion when one of the Soviet prisoners had fallen into their hands they had despatched him back to the Soviet Union where he had eventually, according to one account, been shot in front of his unit. In discussion Mr Miller acknowledged that the attitude of the Pakistan Government was crucial and that on past from it was unlikely to be favourable. He did not want to embarrass HMG with the Pakistan Government. Sir A Parsons pointed out that judging by what Mr Miller had said about the relationship between the Mujahadeen and the Pakistanis on this issue there must surely be a risk that if the Pakistan Government were formally approached and gave a negative answer, the survival prospects for those Soviet prisoners in Mujahadeen hands would become even worse than they already were.

5. Mr Miller thought that one way of reducing the possible /embarrassment

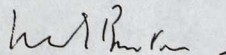


embarrassment for Western Governments of becoming too closely involved would be for camps to be set up, possibly only for transit purposes, in third countries who have less reservations about engaging in propaganda follow-up. He mentioned Morocco, Jordan and Oman. Sir A Parsons commented that any third world country would have to have strong nerves to withstand the fury of the Soviet response. He was surprised that Egypt had not been mentioned since, at least under Sadat, it might have been a good candidate. I questioned whether Jordan would be suitable in view of its concern for its relations with the Soviet Union.

6. There was also some discussion of the Soviet prisoners held in Switzerland as a result of the ICRC agreement with the Kabul regime. Mr Miller said that he understood that, as regards the prisoner who had escaped from Switzerland to West Germany, Herr Genscher had now agreed that he would not be returned to the Soviet Union. The visitors said that the main problem was that the agreement stipulated that the prisoners should be interned in Switzerland for two years (or for the duration of hostilities, whichever was the shorter) before being repatriated to the USSR. The prisoners had agreed in advance to the ICRC's terms, including the condition regarding repatriation. Sir A Parsons doubted whether the ICRC or the Swiss would nevertheless force any prisoners to return to the Soviet Union against their wishes.

7. There was a brief discussion on the usual lines about the importance of the Mujahadeen receiving modern arms.

8. The visitors asked when they might be told whether any action would be taken on their approach. They said that Count Nikolai Tolstoy had written to the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State. Sir A Parsons said he would be in touch in due course.

  
M StE Burton  
South Asian Department