

PRIME MINISTER

SOVIET PRISONERS CAPTURED BY THE
AFGHAN RESISTANCE

You were worried that an earlier draft
reply to Count Tolstoy was too
negative.

In our absence in New Delhi, Tony Parsons
produced the attached reply. Content?

A. J. C.

2 December 1983

CF GR

Parsons please.

Sub

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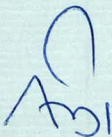
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MR. COMES

SOVIET PRISONERS IN AFGHANISTAN

I attach a redraft of the letter to Count Tolstoy to take into account the FCO's latest letter of 1 December. I also attach copies of the Bethell articles in the Daily Mail. I saw one or two television programmes showing the two Russians giving a press conference.

My own feeling, a compression from my original minute, is that we should not be too discouraging. I doubt whether the presence, even with publicity, of one or two Soviet defectors in Britain would have a marked adverse effect on Anglo-Soviet relations. Equally, if we were faced with specific requests for political asylum, I cannot see our being able to refuse them. The main problem, which we cannot reveal to Count Tolstoy in a letter, is the Pakistanis. If the trickle became a flood and they felt themselves exposed, they would be unable to resist Soviet pressure. This would not only wreck the ICRC's efforts on behalf of prisoners on both sides, but would also lead to Soviet defection drying up. If Russian soldiers thought that, at best, they were likely to be handed back to their own authorities by the Pakistanis, they would think even harder about deserting.



A.D. PARSONS
1 December 1983

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DRAFT LETTER TO COUNT NIKOLAI TOLSTOY FROM JOHN COLES

The Prime Minister has asked me to thank you for your letter of 23 October about Soviet prisoners captured by the Afghan resistance.

Since you wrote, the Prime Minister has seen the interesting publicity given by Nicholas Bethell to the two defectors from the Soviet Army in Afghanistan. His article in the Daily Mail of 25 November gives a vivid account of conditions in the Soviet Army and of the disillusionment amongst those involved in Afghanistan.

We fully understand your concern at the possible fate of Soviet prisoners in the hands of the Afghan resistance. You rightly point out some of the reasons why this question must be approached with tact and discretion.

We are of course also concerned for the fate of those Afghan resistance fighters who have been captured by the Babrak Karmal regime or by the Russians. As you no doubt know, the efforts of the International Committee of the Red Cross to arrange the release of these resistance prisoners have so far been blocked by the Karmal regime.

It is obviously important that nothing should be done to jeopardise the safety of prisoners on both sides. Discretion has been essential to the efforts of the ICRC. These efforts have been partially successful in that some Soviet soldiers have been transferred to internment in Switzerland. We have no reason to think that there is any question of Soviet prisoners being returned to the Soviet Union against their will. Hence, there is no parallel with the events of 1945 to which you refer.

As regards the question of asylum in Great Britain, neither we nor, I believe, any other government could give a blanket assurance. I am sure that you will understand this. However, it would be wrong to assume that individual applications would be treated unsympathetically.

CF Papers

End

c. Sir A. Larous
FO



10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

6 December 1983

The Prime Minister has asked me to thank you for your letter of 23 October about Soviet prisoners captured by the Afghan resistance.

Since you wrote, the Prime Minister has seen the interesting publicity given by Nicholas Bethell to the two defectors from the Soviet Army in Afghanistan. His article in the Daily Mail of 25 November gives a vivid account of conditions in the Soviet Army and of the disillusionment amongst those involved in Afghanistan.

We fully understand your concern at the possible fate of Soviet prisoners in the hands of the Afghan resistance. You rightly point out some of the reasons why this question must be approached with tact and discretion.

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ABC

Count Nikolai Tolstoy

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SPARC

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КОМИТЕТ СПАСЕНИЯ СОВЕТСКИХ ПЛЕННЫХ
В АФГАНИСТАНЕ
SOVIET PRISONERS IN AFGHANISTAN
RESCUE COMMITTEE

Address: SPARC, 78 Beckenham road, Beckenham/Kent BR34RH, United Kingdom, Bank Account: Account No 91115758, Midland Bank Plc. 184, High Street, Bromley/Kent, BRI HL, United Kingdom

Court Close,
Southmoor,
nr. Abingdon,
Berks. OX13 5HS.

10th December 1983

Dear Mr. Cole,

Thank you for your letter of 6th December, regarding Red Army prisoners of war taken in Afghanistan.

My Committee greatly appreciates the Prime Minister's concern with this important problem, and fully accepts the good intentions of Government in the matter of offering asylum to individual prisoners where appropriate. Discretion is clearly all-important in every aspect, and we are only anxious to establish an atmosphere of goodwill towards these unfortunate men.

Yours sincerely,
Nikolai Tolstoy.

Please copy to F/C.O. (N. Bone)
and to Sir A. Parsons.

Then p.a.

A.S.C. 19/12.

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Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

1 December, 1983

Dear John,

Soviet Prisoners in Afghanistan Rescue Committee

My letter of 18 November enclosed a draft reply to Count Nikolai Tolstoy's letter of 23 October to the Prime Minister.

Meanwhile, you will be aware of Lord Bethell's exclusive article in the Daily Mail of 25 November reporting his interview with two Soviet soldiers who had been brought to the West from Afghanistan where they had defected to the resistance. Both soldiers were granted refugee status by the US, and arrived in New Year on 28 November.

We were aware on other channels of American plans to exfiltrate two soldiers to Europe, but were not warned that they might be used for publicity purposes. Lord Bethell approached us on 23 November to ask if visas could be issued for the soldiers to visit the UK, but later that day informed us that they would be going elsewhere in Europe. He interviewed the soldiers in Brussels on 24 November. We do not know how Lord Bethell gained access to the soldiers.

We asked our Embassy in Islamabad to tell the Pakistani MFA about the article and to point out that it could give rise to press enquiries in Pakistan. As you will see from the enclosed telegram, the MFA did not believe that press enquiries would cause them difficulties, but added that they would feel obliged to hand back any would-be defectors on Pakistani soil of whom the Russians were aware. They also broadly confirmed our assessment that the Pakistani authorities would not welcome any publicity campaign which put the spotlight on Pakistan.

We also asked the Embassy in Washington to speak to the State Department to clarify their policy towards Soviet prisoners. As reported in the enclosed telegram, the State Department disclaimed US Government involvement in the exfiltration of the two soldiers (which seems to indicate that the State Department have been kept as much in the dark as ourselves). However, the Americans confirmed that their policy on asylum for Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan is similar to our own, namely that they would consider individual cases on their merits, but could not give a blanket assurance.

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We see no need to amend the advice in my letter of 18 November in the light of these developments. However, you might wish to consider working into the Prime Minister's reply to Count Tolstoy a reference to the light which Lord Bethell's article shed on Soviet activities in Afghanistan, and the poor morale of the Soviet occupying forces.

Yours ever,

Peter Ricketts

(P F Ricketts)
Private Secretary

A J Coles Esq
10 Downing Street

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Letter from Richetto to Coles dated 1 December 1983

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AA

