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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

5 September 1984

OLEG GEORGIYEVICH BITOV

Thank you for your letter of 4 September enclosing a Security Service report about Mr. Bitov's disappearance. The Prime Minister has read this with close attention and would like to see a further report following the meeting referred to in your letter. I should be grateful if you would ensure that No. 10 is informed if news of Mr. Bitov's disappearance breaks and you resort to the press line enclosed with your letter.

I am sending copies of this letter to Len Appleyard (Foreign and Commonwealth Office) and to Richard Hatfield (Cabinet Office).

(C.D. Powell)

Hugh Taylor, Esq.,
Home Office

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HOME OFFICE
QUEEN ANNE'S GATE
LONDON SW1H 9AT

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4 September 1984

Prime Minister

CDP 4/9

Dear Charles,

..... Thank you for your letter of 31 August about Mr Bitov. I enclose a report by the Security Service setting out their present knowledge about Mr Bitov's disappearance.

A further meeting of those who have been involved with the case is to take place on Wednesday morning. One of the important issues then to be considered is whether it is to our advantage to allow the disappearance to remain unpublicised for much longer. Consideration will also be given to whether there are early lessons to be learned about the handling of defectors once they have arrived here.

..... I enclose a copy of the interim press line which has been largely prepared for use if the disappearance becomes public before we decide whether to make the news available ourselves. The precise terms of the response to be given to the press will depend on the circumstances in which the disappearance is revealed.

Copies of this letter and enclosures go to Len Appleyard and Richard Hatfield.

Yours sincerely,
H H Taylor

H H TAYLOR

C Powell, Esq.

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BITOV Oleg Georgiyevich

Background

On 9 September 1983 BITOV approached the British Consulate in Venice and asked for political asylum. At the time he was attending the Venice Film Festival in his capacity as the Foreign Culture Editor of the Soviet Journal Liteaturnaya Gazetta (Literary Gazette). He was taken to Rome for preliminary questioning and was flown to the United Kingdom the following day. After extensive interviews by Security Service he was formally granted defector status.

2. BITOV claimed that he had been thinking of defecting for about three years because he was increasingly angered and frustrated by the repressive Soviet system. He said that he went to Venice with his mind quote 75 per cent determined unquote on defection and the shooting down of the Korean airliner on 1 September 1983 finally decided him.

3.

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4. During the last year BITOV has written a number of articles for the Times and Sunday Telegraph and he has, more recently, reached agreement with Readers Digest to produce further articles. He has also negotiated a lucrative agreement with Sir James Goldsmith to publish further material. From all these sources he has earned over £40,000 in the last nine months.

BITOV's disappearance

5. BITOV spent the evening of 15 August at the home of Leonid FINKELSTEIN (BBC Russian Department) in the company of Mrs FINKELSTEIN and Mr and Mrs Anatoliy GLADILINE (he is the head of the Paris Station of Radio Free Europe). FINKELSTEIN himself was away in West Germany. Mrs FINKELSTEIN has since told the Security Service that BITOV did not seem to be under strain although he had mentioned that in a recent traffic accident he had quote knocked an old wound on his head unquote. As a result, he said, he was suffering from headaches, sickness, vomiting and intermittent amnesia.

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6. According to Mrs FINKELSTEIN, BITOV invited the GLADILINES to visit his flat the following evening, Thursday 16 August, to listen to some tape recordings of Russian music (BITOV had earlier told his Security Service case officer that he would not issue such an invitation). On the afternoon of 16 August GLADILINE telephoned BITOV to ask for the loan of £300 to pay for the repairs to the clutch on his car, with which he had had trouble on the way from Paris. BITOV appeared very willing to help and to be delighted with the suggestion that GLADILINE should repay the loan in roubles direct to BITOV's wife in Moscow. BITOV also said that he would telephone GLADILINE by 1300 hours on 17 August to arrange a meeting at which he would hand the money over. At the same time he withdrew the invitation for that evening, claiming that he was too busy.
7. During the day (16 August) BITOV also met his Security Service case officer for three quarters of an hour in central London. The meeting was arranged at BITOV's request because he was very anxious to get his hands on a parcel of music tapes recently forwarded to him by a Russian emigre friend in the USA. BITOV appeared to be in very good spirits and said that he was looking forward to a happy musical weekend. He also said that he had made progress in some written work which he was doing for Brian Crozier on behalf of Sir James Goldsmith. Finally, he asked his case officer to confirm the time of his medical appointment on Monday 20 August.
8. BITOV did not telephone GLADILINE on 17 August and repeated calls to his flat by Mrs FINKELSTEIN up to midnight failed to elicit any response. The GLADILINES returned to France on Saturday 18 August. BITOV did not keep his medical appointment on 20 August and he also missed dental appointments on 21 and 23 August as well as one with his case officer on 22 August.
9. After his failure to keep the dental appointment on 21 August the Security Service decided to enlist the help of the Metropolitan Police to try and find his car. Great care had to be taken to avoid the risk of attracting press attention. On 22 August BITOV's car was found in Emperor's Gate SW7 with its wheels clamped by the traffic police. The clamps had been fitted on 20 August.
10. BITOV's flat was then searched by the Metropolitan Police in the presence of the Security Service case officer. The search suggested that BITOV had had at least one visitor to the flat on the evening of 16 August and appeared to have been preparing for a trip away (possibly for the weekend). He had packed a number of personal belongings including the tapes from America; his toilet equipment and some medicinal tablets were still in the flat.

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There were no signs, however, of any personal identifying documents nor was his camera found. Also missing was a Hermes scarf which BITOV had told his case officer he was very keen to get to his daughter in Moscow in time for her forthcoming sixteenth birthday. The flat was in considerable disorder and was very untidy. There was also evidence of vomit in the wash-basin, the lavatory bowl and on the carpet in the vicinity of the latter.

11. BITOV has now not been seen by his case officer or by any of his own friends since 16 August. If he had suffered an accident or illness or was in hospital for any other reason it is very unlikely that the Security Service, the Police or his friends would not by now have learned of his whereabouts, particularly as it seems likely that he had with him his Home Office travel documents, car registration book and a copy of the Home Office letter approving his unlimited stay in the United Kingdom. The Security Service consider it most unlikely that BITOV could for some unknown reason have chosen to go to ground for a short spell within the United Kingdom.

12. It therefore seems likely that he has either returned voluntarily to the Soviet Union or has been kidnapped by the Russians.

These were consistent with the removal (whether enforced or voluntary) of BITOV from London on the afternoon of 18 August. Evidence points towards a booking on the Balkan Airlines flight to Sofia on that day. If this interpretation is correct it would appear very probable that BITOV travelled, presumably voluntarily, in his own name using the documents known to have been in his possession. There is no evidence which in the opinion of the Security Service points specifically towards a kidnapping.

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13. The Security Service has considered whether BITOV could have been a KGB plant all along, and has concluded that this is highly unlikely. His re-defection, if that is what it was, could provide the Russians with some propaganda if they decide to make use of it. Assuming that his original defection was genuine the Russians will however have to consider very carefully what action to take since they will inevitably be extremely suspicious of BITOV's motives. They may therefore not make any immediate announcement of BITOV's return.

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As nr: 3/9/84.

PRESS LINE

OLEG GEORGIEVICH BITOV

BACKGROUND

Mr Bitov is a Russian national and former Cultural Editor of the Russian Literary Magazine "Literary Gazette". He sought and has been granted asylum in the United Kingdom. His reasons for seeking asylum have been well publicised. He issued a statement of his views on 25 October 1983 and subsequently articles appeared in the Sunday Telegraph in early 1984.

LINES FOR USE IN RESPONSE TO ENQUIRIES ABOUT HIS DISAPPEARANCE

1. IS IT TRUE THAT MR BITOV HAS DISAPPEARED?

Mr Bitov's current whereabouts are not known to us. He is a free person whose movement is not restricted.

2. HAVE THE POLICE BEEN INFORMED?

Yes.

3. WHAT EFFORTS ARE BEING MADE TO FIND HIM?

Obviously we are making enquiries but we are not prepared to go into details.

4. IS IT POSSIBLE THAT THE RUSSIANS OR ONE OF THEIR ALLIES MAY HAVE ABDUCTED MR BITOV?

There is no present evidence to suggest that Mr Bitov's disappearance has occurred under duress. We are not prepared to speculate.

5. WHEN WAS MR BITOV LAST SEEN?

As far as we know at the moment he has not been seen since 16 August.

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6. WHO WERE THE LAST PEOPLE TO SEE MR BITOV? A MEMBER OF THE SECURITY SERVICE?

Some close friends of Mr Bitov who have reported to us. We are not prepared to comment further.

7. HAD MR BITOV BEEN BEHAVING STRANGELY BEFORE HIS DISAPPEARANCE?

No. He appeared normal to those who were in touch with him.

8. DID MR BITOV EVER EXPRESS AN INTENTION/WISH TO RETURN TO THE SOVIET UNION?

Not that we are aware, though he did express concern on a number of occasions about his separation from his wife and daughter.

9. IS THERE ANY REASON TO SUSPECT THAT MR BITOV WAS A PLANT?

No reason to suspect that his motives in coming to this country were other than those set out in his statement of 25 October 1983 and the articles subsequently published in the press.

10. WHAT WAS THE SECURITY SERVICE'S RELATIONSHIP WITH MR BITOV AFTER HE WAS ALLOWED TO STAY IN THIS COUNTRY?

We never comment on such matters.

11. ARE YOU ABLE TO SAY WHERE AND HOW MR BITOV LEFT THIS COUNTRY? IS IT POSSIBLE HE HAS RETURNED TO RUSSIA?

Mr Bitov's current whereabouts are not known to us but the possibility that he has returned to Russia cannot be ruled out.

12. HOW LONG HAS MR BITOV BEEN IN THE UNITED KINGDOM?

About one year.

LINES FOR USE IF THE RUSSIANS PUBLISH A STATEMENT BY MR BITOV

The response will depend on the terms of any statement or article but the points of emphasis will be that Mr Bitov's reasons for seeking refuge here were well publicised

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by him, that he is free to come and go as he pleases and has chosen to return to Russia. We see no reason why Mr Bitov's return to Russia should affect United Kingdom/Soviet relations.

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