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28 November 1986

From the Private Secretary

Dear Coli,

PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH MR. ORLOV

The Prime Minister met Mr. Uri Orlov this morning. Lord Bethell was also present.

The Prime Minister said that she particularly admired the courageous position which Mr. Orlov had taken as leader of the Helsinki Monitoring Group in Moscow. The action which the Soviet authorities had taken in expelling him revealed the complete lack of freedom and humanity in the Soviet system. Even now, people in the West did not fully understand the cruelty and the deprivations of the Soviet prison system and particularly solitary confinement. They could easily be misled by the smooth, smart Gorbachevs that the Soviet Union itself had changed. It was the experience of people like Mr. Orlov which so showed the true nature of the system.

The Prime Minister continued that she had read Mr. Orlov's account of his experiences in the Soviet Union as well as his comments since coming to the West. She wholly agreed with him that we should not treat relations with the Soviet Union as being only a matter of arms control. The genius of the Helsinki Accords was that they gave the West a locus for asking about human rights in the Soviet Union. Without that, the Soviet Union could always have argued that these were purely internal matters.

Mr. Orlov said that he would like to concentrate on a specific issue, that was Shevardnadze's proposal for holding a human rights conference in Moscow. The Soviets would calculate that they could hold the sort of conference which they wanted because it would be in their capital city. They would expel from Moscow all those who might want to speak at the conference or mount a protest, and block entrance to Moscow from the provinces. The conference hall would be surrounded by men in civilian clothes who would be passed off as ordinary Soviet citizens. The programme and arrangements for the conference would be full of calculated ambiguity. If the West agreed to hold a conference in Moscow, the terms must be carefully and explicitly worked out in advance, on the model of a commercial contract, with no ambiguity or grounds for possible misinterpretation. There should be a specific list of those who would be entitled to be present, either as

participants or as witnesses and the security of those attending must be guaranteed. The West's list should include both Soviet emigrés and citizens of the Soviet Union including those currently in detention. He would be ready to attend himself. All members of the Helsinki Monitoring Group in the Soviet Union should be invited. The very fact of insisting on their participation would strengthen their position. The Soviet authorities would argue that the people concerned were criminals. In that case visits should be arranged to their places of detention; or they could be brought from prison to the conference and returned afterwards. The Soviet Union would want to concentrate attention on alleged violation of social and economic rights in the West, as well as political rights in places like Turkey and Northern Ireland. The West should be prepared to set out Soviet shortcomings in these areas, for instance the system of food rationing in the provinces, the long waits for housing, the millions of people in camps. Above all, it must be clear that there should be no closed meeting. Even in Ottawa, the Soviet Union had manoeuvred successfully to ensure that the meetings were closed. He could not understand why the western delegations had allowed closed meetings to be held on open subjects. There was also the important matter of follow up. The Soviet Union would want all Helsinki Basket III matters regulated on the state network rather than through individuals or private organisations. The West should not agree to this.

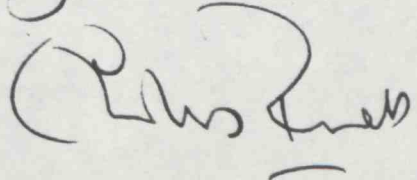
The Prime Minister said that she was grateful for this full account of how the West should react to the Soviet proposal. She herself was extremely sceptical. She did not believe that any promises made by the Soviet Union about the conditions for such a conference would be honoured. They would manage it in the way indicated by Mr. Orlov. A number of people thought that it would be a good idea to hold the conference in Moscow and tackle the Soviet establishment on these issues in its own capital city. The West should be seen to try and fail rather than not try at all. She herself was opposed to this. Once we got locked into discussions with the Soviet Union, the West would be driven by a compulsion to compromise which the Soviet Union would exploit. She would therefore try hard not to have it in Moscow. She hoped that Mr. Orlov was alerting other governments in the West to all the tricks and devices with the Soviet Union would use to stop freedom of speech and ideas at a conference. It was important to take account of the new phenomenon represented by Mr. Gorbachev, who was far more able than his predecessors to manipulate opinion in the West. This meant that the West must watch its tactics and presentation more carefully than ever. She was very conscious of the need to give hope and help to those who remained inside the Soviet system. There were thousands who were still in the Soviet Union working for greater freedom.

The Prime Minister said that she had one further question she wanted to put to Mr. Orlov. As a scientist how did he explain the Soviet Union's success in conducting excellent scientific work in an atmosphere devoid of freedom? Was it just a question of material advantages enjoyed by scientists?

Mr. Orlov said that in the military field, research was a closed area in any country and thus Soviet scientists were not noticeably at a disadvantage compared with their western colleagues. Certainly material rewards were a major factor. In the field of civil science the situation was much worse, although one or two distinguished scientists were sufficiently powerful to be able to operate the system to the advantage of themselves and their colleagues. But generally the Soviet Union was hopelessly behind in civil science. The Prime Minister commented that she had recently seen her old tutor at Oxford, Professor Hodgkin, who had recently visited the Institute of Crystallography in Moscow and had found some remarkable work being done in producing a crystal of the growth hormone. She would like to visit this Institute, but would not do so if it would appear that by doing so she was giving support to the Soviet system. She wanted her visit to the Soviet Union to be a sign of hope to those who wanted freedom.

The Prime Minister concluded that she expected to visit Moscow in the late spring. She would very much like a further talk with Mr. Orlov before doing so. Mr. Orlov said he would be very happy to come over from New York for this.

I am copying this letter to Trevor Woolley (Cabinet Office).

Yours sincerely,


CHARLES POWELL

Colin Budd, Esq.,
Foreign and Commonwealth Office.