

Record of Conversation between Aleksandr Yakovlev and Zbigniew Brzezinski, October 31, 1989

Brzezinski: I have a very good impression from this visit to your country. As you probably know, I had an opportunity to present a lecture at the Diplomatic Academy. I also thank you very much for organizing a trip to Katyń for me. For me personally this is very important both politically and symbolically. As you probably know, I gave an interview to Soviet, Polish, and American television. In this interview I wanted to say three things. Firstly, I am glad that my trip to Katyń took place. Secondly, I am glad that right now the truth about Stalin and his crimes is being spoken frankly. Thirdly, and most importantly, I said that the truth should serve to bring the people of the Soviet Union and Poland closer, rather than pushing them apart.

I would like to use this meeting to ask you a number of questions. First of all, I would like to ask you how you see the changes taking place in the countries of Eastern Europe, and what you expect in the future. After all, the countries of Eastern Europe are undergoing a period of dynamic development, new relations between socialist countries are forming; what formed between 1945 and 1950 is rapidly changing. Also, if you have time, I would like you to answer the question of how you see the further development of the Soviet Union. It seems to me that the rift between political reform and the real economic situation has never been so great. In this, your country can be compared to China, with the difference that in China everything was exactly the opposite--the economic reforms there were far ahead of the political system's reform.

Yakovlev: I have known of your work for a while. In particular I see in you the embodiment of the union between theoretician and pragmatic politician.

About Eastern Europe.

I would like first of all to point out that we are strictly following what we said at the very beginning of perestroika, for example the statement about respecting freedom of speech. Since 1985, when we said this, we have continued to strictly follow this.

Brzezinski: Did you expect that it could go so far?

Yakovlev: Why not? We are troubled by something else. If the processes taking place in Eastern Europe right now continue to proceed strictly on the basis of those countries' internal development, then there is nothing to worry about. It would be a mistake for Western Europe or the USA to intervene in these processes in any way. We must not forget that we have a common border with these countries and without question we have our own interests in connection with this. But right now we see no direct threat. We have not changed our relations with Poland one bit, and the new Polish leadership assures us that it is interested in upholding normal friendly relations with our country, and does not intend to change existing agreements.

Brzezinski: Over a year ago, during my meeting with Wałęsa, I recommended that he visit Moscow before his visit to Washington.

Yakovlev: Why not? Let him visit. I do not see any obstacles.

Brzezinski: At the same time I would like to know how you define intervention and what exactly you mean by this.

Yakovlev: Frankly speaking, it would be quite unpleasant if the Poles were egged on against Russia. Some people are doing this in the mass media in other ways. In present-day Poland, sometimes people allow themselves to do this. For example, one of the representatives of the present Polish government started saying that we have to pay some kind of compensation. But 700,000 of our soldiers died there. Sometimes Soviet soldiers' graves are defiled. I believe that soldiers' graves should not be touched.

Let everything develop gradually in Poland. They are in a very difficult economic situation right now. You know the situation in Poland better than I do. But I do not take it upon myself to predict when they will be able to overcome the current crisis. One should help. But at the same time, the Poles are now already beginning to understand that they need to work better themselves. The day before yesterday Wałęsa spoke about this. In general, no one will solve their problems for them.

And no one will solve our problems for us. Our point of view is the same for Poland and Hungary. Right now in Hungary they have formed a Socialist Party. But I see that people are not too eager to be part of this Socialist Party. Now they have created an organizing committee to reconstitute the HSWP [Hungarian Socialist Workers Party]. What will come of this? I do not know and I do not take it upon myself to say anything; let them analyze it themselves.

Brzezinski: Nikolay Shishlin, your politician, says that he thinks that nothing bad would happen if both Poland and Hungary withdrew from the Warsaw Treaty Organization. Is this the official position or only his point of view? Personally I think that the Warsaw Treaty Organization must be a political union, not an ideological one. But at the same time a coordination of the member countries' actions must be maintained.

Yakovlev: In this case I agree with you absolutely that there must not be any individual withdrawals from military-political alliances. This would disturb stability. It would be a different matter if we come to an agreement and disband both military-political unions.

Brzezinski: Here I do not agree. I do not think that the time has come to disband these alliances. Gradually, new opportunities for a transition to a new system will arise. Only then can the alliances be disbanded. On the basis that exists right now, East and West can conduct discussions about all issues. However, if some continue to provoke the population of Eastern Europe with all kinds of statements--which can be interpreted by certain elements in their own way, considering the sensitivity of the German question--it could cause a most acute political crisis.

Yakovlev: Yes, in this you are right. During this transitional period both our sides must be very mindful and careful. A moment could come when all past offenses, pretensions, etc., overtake people's common sense, and then everything could simply explode. We must pass this stage very calmly. Both sides must exhibit maximum vigilance.

With all its negative aspects, Afghanistan had one positive moment for us. From Afghanistan's example we came to the conclusion that not one Soviet soldier should be in a foreign country with the purpose of conducting warfare. In the end, we should come to an agreement so that we have the same understanding from your side.

Brzezinski: To resolve the Afghan problem it is necessary for [President Mohammad] Najibullah to leave. He was and remains for the country's entire population a successor to

Babrak Karmal and a symbol of the former regime. If he leaves, the Jirga and other organs will be able to negotiate a national agreement faster.

Yakovlev: This is a decision for that country's people. Let them decide.

Brzezinski: But you have enormous influence there. You could resolve this issue. After all, many Afghans do not want a compromise. If Najibullah had to urgently leave the country due to health concerns and go to the Soviet Union or some other place for treatment, it would answer the interests of all sides.

Yakovlev: I have already told you that the people themselves must decide this.

Matlock: It seems to us that for the Afghans themselves resolution of the issue with the participation of Najibullah is unacceptable.

Yakovlev: So let them express this.

Brzezinski: Right now insurgents control around 90 percent of Afghanistan's territory. Najibullah controls only the major cities, and the roads between them have already been cut off.

Yakovlev: You will, however, agree with me that in the end Afghanistan shares a border with the Soviet Union and not the United States.

Brzezinski: Of course I agree that in this case the interests of your state's security are involved. However, we would like [Afghanistan] to be a neutral country, maintaining good-neighborly relations with you, as it was under Daud until the Afghan tragedy occurred.

What changes do you expect to take place in Eastern Europe, considering the fact that there as well you have an interest in securing stability and security? By my calculations, events similar to the ones in Poland and Hungary must soon take place in Czechoslovakia, and we will most likely react calmly to this. But if the process of democratization begins in East Germany then that artificial state, created on an ideological basis, will soon crumble. And if ideology as an element of its existence falls away, then the current regime will quickly tumble and the question of reuniting the two Germanys will immediately arise. This is dangerous. How should the German question be solved? What will it be: a confederation, the ratification of a new agreement between former allies in World War II? All of this needs to be thought through thoroughly.

Yakovlev: I think the fact that right now [Egon] Krenz, after being chosen to the position of leader of the GDR and SED, has verbally stated that he needs to establish working contacts with the FRG leadership signifies that a very good step was taken. Who knows what it will lead to in the future? I think that right now no one will take it upon himself to predict it. One thing is clear--democratic and peaceful states must exist in the heart of Europe, on the German territories, not states that are increasing their armaments. We had enough with the destructive war of the past. For us this is a matter of principle. We do not want another war. As a veteran of World War II, I know that while I live I will be unambiguous about it, and my generation will always be mindful. One careless movement can change the balance of power and the situation in Europe. [Alfred] Dregger from the FRG and his ilk must clearly perceive the problem in its entirety. By the way, I met with him recently. During the war we were of about the same rank; one could say we fought against each other. He, of course, is a nationalist and is only for himself; he speaks against you and against us. You cannot call him a fascist, but nationalism does not lead to democracy either. In my opinion, he should be more careful. Also troubling were his statements along the lines of saying that the processes in Eastern Europe are a sign of our weakness. The

most important thing is to understand that any changes are [to be] made by the people. We have said this and we will hold this course.

Brzezinski: The conception of European stability provides for a combination of different social-political and social-economic interests, including the introduction of such forms as multi-party systems, free markets, etc. It seems as though this coincides with the USSR's national interests, which cannot be unconcerned about maintaining stability in Europe.

Yakovlev: In this respect we have a mutual concern: not to have hostile nations at our borders.

Brzezinski: That is why I openly said that I am in favor of Poland and Hungary remaining within the Warsaw Treaty Organization. Both blocs should not be disbanded right now. I do not know what will happen if the GDR ceases to exist. There will be one Germany, united and strong. This does not correspond to either your or our interests.

Yakovlev: How would you keep the GDR? By force?

Brzezinski: I think that is also not necessary. Political possibilities always exist.

Yakovlev: But right now many demonstrations are going on there.

Brzezinski: These are the Prussians. By their nature, they are very disciplined people. And if 300,000 people came out to demonstrate, it is evidence of a very serious crisis.

Yakovlev: I was informed that the situation there is stabilizing. A dialogue has begun between members of the government and participants in the demonstrations.

Brzezinski: In terms of approaching the collaboration of Warsaw Treaty members with European Common Market countries or United Europe, do you on the whole allow that in the future such countries as Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia will, on the one hand, effectively collaborate with West European countries in the economic sphere and, on the other hand, remain loyal members of the Warsaw Treaty Organization?

Yakovlev: There are many questions about Europe's future. What will happen? The European countries will have a common parliament, common affairs and trade relations; the borders will be open. And what will happen with long-established bilateral relations between Western Europe and the socialist countries? How, for example, will economic relations between the USSR and Belgium develop further? How will military issues be resolved considering the fact that United Europe will include some neutral states?

At the same time, this has to be considered a component of the policies directed at building a Common European Home. If this project succeeds in creating an effectively functioning economic association, if it succeeds in following the social interests of the workers, then it deserves our interest, and we are prepared to cooperate with Europe.

Brzezinski: Of course, right now you have many cares, including concerns about ideological issues. If in the near future there is no catastrophe in Poland and Hungary, they will become stable, multi-party democratic systems with market economies. And your people will also begin to say: do what they did.

I am in your country for the sixth time. This time I was most struck by the gap between the Soviet Union and the West in its present form. Right now one can say that you are not going through merely an economic crisis. Even against the background of what was here a short while

ago one perceives a decline. And considering the depth of the gap one can draw the conclusion that it is very likely that a political crisis could strike your country as well. I am digesting all of this right now, but I am afraid to predict concrete outcomes.

[Source: State Archive of the Russian Federation [GARF], Moscow. Yakovlev Collection. Fond 10063. Opis 1. Delo 266. On file at the National Security Archive. Translated by Anna Melyakova.]