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10 DOWNING STREET

LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

9 June 1990

Dear Stephen,

PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH SOVIET MILITARY LEADERS

The Prime Minister had a 50 minute meeting with Soviet military leaders in the Soviet Ministry of Defence yesterday afternoon. The Soviet side was led by the Minister of Defence, Marshal Yazov. He was flanked by the three Service Chiefs Marshal Moiseev, Air Marshal Efimov and Fleet Admiral Chernavin. Admiral Khuzhokov and General Manilov were also present. HM Ambassador Moscow attended on our side.

I suppose a few years ago the idea of a British Prime Minister sitting down with the Soviet Minister of Defence and all the Service Chiefs would have seemed wildly improbable. But Marshal Yazov handled it with considerable courtesy and aplomb. Although it was a fairly combative session and the Soviet commanders emerged with their armour slightly dented and their helmets somewhat askew, the general atmosphere was good-humoured.

The Prime Minister began by commenting on the main council chamber of the Ministry of Defence where we were meeting, saying how important it was to preserve military tradition. Marshal Yazov agreed. Traditions were vital to armed forces and the Soviet military took great trouble to instil them in younger soldiers.

Marshal Yazov continued by extending a very warm welcome to the Prime Minister. It was a great source of personal pleasure to him that she had come, and he recalled the satisfaction of their meeting in London. We had all come a long way since then. There had recently been a very successful visit by the Defence Secretary, who had seen everything he had wanted to see. The Prime Minister said that we had been very happy to receive Marshal Yazov, and she knew that Mr. King had been very well satisfied with his visit to the Soviet Union.

The Prime Minister continued that she had wanted to see Marshal Yazov and his colleagues because she felt we were entering a new period in relations between East and West. The communique issued by the Warsaw Pact meeting the previous day had exemplified the end of confrontation and the opening of a new stage of more positive relations. Even so, she believed that every country must continue to preserve its security with a strong defence. You never knew where the next threat would come from. There was scope for reducing conventional forces and nuclear weapons and for modifying and adapting our strategy to new circumstances. But we would continue to need nuclear weapons: they were the best deterrent to war. The Prime

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Minister continued that she had visited the NATO Foreign Ministers meeting the previous day and had urged a review of NATO strategy, in particular, whether forward defence was still appropriate but she believed that nuclear deterrence would continue to be a vital part of that strategy. It was no coincidence that we had just completed the longest period of peace in European history. Marshal Yazov said the Prime Minister was right in what she said about Europe and the new period which we were entering. But he did not really share her views on nuclear weapons. Five countries had nuclear weapons, yet there were still wars in the world. He believed that in the long term, nuclear weapons were dangerous and were bound to spread unless we could agree effective measures on nuclear disarmament. The Prime Minister said the point was that the nuclear powers were all countries which knew the need for restraint. Unfortunately we were not going to be able to stop some other countries from obtaining nuclear weapons and her fear was that they would not be as restrained as the existing nuclear powers. She would never put British forces in the position where they could be threatened by nuclear weapons without the capacity to deter. So long as Britain had its independent nuclear deterrent she was confident it would never be attacked. Our nuclear cooperation with the United States was longstanding and would continue. She was absolutely determined to keep our nuclear deterrent up to date. Marshal Yazov said there was no guarantee that nuclear weapons would never be used. After all, they had been used at the end of the last war. The Prime Minister commented that she was sure that, in reality, Marshal Yazov accepted that conventional weapons alone could not deter war. That was why she had been so worried by the talk at Reykjavik of a world without nuclear weapons. She did not want to get into a protracted argument about this, and one day, in the distant future, the situation might be different. The main point for now was that we were going into a period where we could all have more confidence in each other.

Marshal Yazov said that he could agree with this last point. But on the nuclear issue he thought that the Prime Minister under-estimated the effect of Chernobyl. The explosion on one boiler had made an enormous impact on public opinion. There were something like 200 nuclear powers stationed in Europe plus a host of nuclear weapons. What would happen if there were further tragedies? The Prime Minister said that she took leave to doubt whether the views of Marshal Yazov and his colleagues on nuclear weapons were in reality very different from her own. After all, they did have an awful lot of them and presumably saw some purpose in that (I think I saw the muscles of Marshal Moiseev's face twitch). Marshal Yazov said that he was aware that the United Kingdom was not planning to attack the Soviet Union, the Soviet Union was not planning to attack Britain. But both had to take account of world opinion. The Prime Minister commented that we were all on defensive strategies now. The Soviet Union in particular needed peace for the courageous and exciting reforms which it was carrying out. But threats to our security could arise from outside Europe altogether. You never knew where they might come from. Our defence was a silent message to anyone who might be tempted to start something: don't. She and President Gorbachev had always agreed on the need for every country to provide for its security.

The Prime Minister continued that we were all a little apprehensive about the reunification of Germany. But it was going to happen and we all had to adapt to that. In her view it was in the interests of all of us - including the Soviet Union -

That American forces should be kept in Germany. That was an insurance policy for the whole of Europe. Marshal Yazov said that he and his colleagues had read the Prime Minister's speech in the NATO Foreign Ministers meeting the previous day very carefully. She had talked of restructuring NATO. He wondered what she had in mind. The Prime Minister said the first point had been a review of NATO's strategy and the forces appropriate to it. NATO no longer had a clear front line in Europe. We would also need to look at the structures of the Alliance and how they could be improved and adapted. She assumed that the Soviet Union was also revising its own strategy. Marshal Yazov said that they had already done so and now had a defensive strategy. The Prime Minister noted that the Soviet Union still maintained very large forces. Marshal Yazov explained that the Soviet Union was a very large country with very long borders.

The Prime Minister said she had read that the Soviet Union was thinking of moving towards a professional army. Marshal Yazov denied this quite vehemently. They could not afford that. But they hoped to have a semi-professional army with a higher proportion of fulltime officers and men. He recalled that at their meeting, the Prime Minister had asked him about the practical problems of reducing the Soviet armed forces. He could tell the Prime Minister that they had released 83,000 officers into civilian life in 1989, and they had all got jobs. Problems lay more with finding accommodation for the forces being withdrawn from Eastern Europe and their families. The Prime Minister commented that, if we decided to reduce our forces in Germany, we might face some of the same problems. She could sympathise.

Marshal Yazov said he wanted to come back to the main point which the Prime Minister had made earlier in the discussion. We all spoke the same words about peace, yet the Prime Minister continued to regard the Soviet as an enemy. The Prime Minister said that things had changed. We had certainly regarded the Soviet Union as an enemy when it was being governed by expansionist Communist ideology which had believed in the victory of Communism all over the world. Of course we had been hostile towards that. But now things looked very different. But she did not want to start a war of words across the table. Those days had gone, she hoped forever. Marshal Yazov interjected that he agreed with that. The Prime Minister continued that nonetheless we had not solved all the world's problems. We still had to contend with Moslem fundamentalism and regional problems like Kashmir. We were worried by the spread of nuclear weapons to countries like North Korea. Marshal Yazov said that the Soviet Union was already experiencing the Moslem factor. But he had recently seen the new North Korean Ambassador who had assured him that North Korea did not have nuclear weapons. The Prime Minister said you would hardly expect him to say anything different. Marshal Moiseev commented that the International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA) were concerned about this.

The Prime Minister said that her purpose in suggesting the meeting had been to reassure Marshal Yazov and his colleagues. Unfortunately there were not many minutes left. Were there any other topics they ought to cover? Marshal Yazov professed not to know there was any time limit on the meeting. He knew that the Prime Minister had discussed the problem of a unified Germany with President Gorbachev that morning. German unification was a matter for concern to the Soviet military and above all to the Soviet people. They would simply not accept a united Germany in NATO. The Prime Minister said it was going to happen so it was

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best to concentrate on providing assurance to the Soviet people that it would not be an extra threat. Marshal Yazov said that perhaps there could be a special form of membership for Germany, rather like France. What was the Soviet Union going to get out of this? What was going to happen to their interests? The Prime Minister said that Marshal Yazov should understand a united Germany was going to be in NATO and that was to the Soviet Union's advantage because it was the way to ensure that American forces would remain in Germany. That was a reassurance to all of us. We were ready to consider other ways to provide such reassurance. Secretary Baker had produced nine points: and she had discussed with President Gorbachev the scope for a NATO/Warsaw Pact declaration. This was a Soviet idea and needed to be given more substance. But she wanted to say that we were aware of the sensitivities and would do our best to meet them. Marshal Yazov then asked about other passages in the Prime Minister's speech but there was no opportunity to pursue these, because the Prime Minister had to leave for her joint press conference with President Gorbachev.

I am copying this letter to John Gieve (HM Treasury), Simon Webb (Ministry of Defence) and Sonia Phippard (Cabinet Office).

Jan Smith
Chris Brown

(C.D. Powell)

Stephen Wall, Esq.,
Foreign and Commonwealth Office.