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Printed for the Cabinet. January 1969

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Copy No. 33

38th Conclusions

CABINET

CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W.1, on Thursday, 22nd August, 1968, at 10 a.m.

Present:

The Right Hon. HAROLD WILSON, M.P., Prime Minister	
The Right Hon. MICHAEL STEWART, M.P., Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs	The Right Hon. RICHARD CROSSMAN, M.P., Lord President of the Council
The Right Hon. JAMES CALLAGHAN, M.P., Secretary of State for the Home Department	The Right Hon. DENIS HEALEY, M.P., Secretary of State for Defence
The Right Hon. FRED PEART, M.P., Lord Privy Seal	The Right Hon. PETER SHORE, M.P., Secretary of State for Economic Affairs
The Right Hon. WILLIAM ROSS, M.P., Secretary of State for Scotland	The Right Hon. GEORGE THOMSON, M.P., Secretary of State for Common- wealth Affairs
The Right Hon. EDWARD SHORT, M.P., Secretary of State for Education and Science	The Right Hon. ANTHONY WEDGWOOD BENN, M.P., Minister of Technology
The Right Hon. CLEDWYN HUGHES, M.P., Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food	The Right Hon. LORD SHACKLETON, Paymaster General
The Right Hon. GEORGE THOMAS, M.P., Secretary of State for Wales	The Right Hon. ROY MASON, M.P., Minister of Power

The following were also present:

The Right Hon. JOHN DIAMOND, M.P., Chief Secretary, Treasury	Mr. EDMUND DELL, M.P., Minister of State, Board of Trade
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Secretariat:

Sir BURKE TREND
Miss J. J. NUNN
Mr. R. R. D. MCINTOSH
Mr. H. L. LAWRENCE-WILSON

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Oversea Affairs
Czechoslovakia
(Previous
Reference:
CC (68) 37th
Conclusions,
Minute 2)

1. *The Foreign Secretary* said that we did not know the strength of the Warsaw Pact forces that had invaded Czechoslovakia on the night of 20th-21st August, but it was clear that their grip on the country was complete although some free radio stations were still operating. Ground forces of the Soviet Union, East Germany, Poland and Bulgaria were involved together with Soviet air forces. There were also indications of an increased level of activity in the Soviet long-range air and rocket forces but these did not appear to be in a high state of alert. A remarkable feature of the political situation was that no Czech leader had so far shown himself willing to act as a Soviet puppet. Mr. Dubcek, the Secretary of the Czech Communist Party, and others were in detention, but President Svoboda had issued a statement on the previous evening calling for the withdrawal of the invading troops and for the liberalisation programme in Czechoslovakia to continue; it might be, however, that the Soviet authorities hoped that he would be prepared to co-operate with them. The Czech people were behaving with very great restraint and, although there had been some deaths, widespread bloodshed did not seem likely. It was not clear why the Soviet Union had resorted to military action, despite the agreement reached at Bratislava; it might be that they did not consider that censorship was being sufficiently rigidly imposed by the Czech Government as a result of the agreement or that they feared the outcome of the elections for the Presidium of the Czech Communist Party which were due to take place on 9th September.

Our decision to publish a statement on the previous day condemning the Soviet action had been both right in principle and justified in its results. Our objective had been to avoid acting in isolation but to be among the leaders of the reaction of world opinion. Support had been rallied in the United Nations and seven members of the Security Council, including France, had called for a meeting of the Council, at which all but the Soviet Union and Hungary had voted for the matter to be inscribed on the agenda. Those voting in favour had included Algeria and also India and Pakistan, whose High Commissioners had been called to a meeting of Commonwealth representatives in London at the Commonwealth Office on the previous day where they had been briefed on the facts of the situation as we knew them and of our attitude to them. It was possible that there would be a vote on a suitable Resolution in the Security Council by the following day. There would be great advantage if, despite the certainty of a Soviet veto, this happened before a puppet Government had been set up in Czechoslovakia. We should decide, in the light of events, what further action would be appropriate in the United Nations.

As regards the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), he had stressed in an interview on television about our attitude to the Czech crisis that recent events had demonstrated the Organisation's great importance. Nevertheless, it did not appear

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that we faced the likelihood of general war in Europe but rather a serious setback to a better understanding between East and West. Although some precautionary action had been taken in NATO and some consideration given to the possible refugee problem, no general alert had been instituted.

Looking to the longer-term effects of recent events on our relations with the Soviet Union and on East/West relations generally, our objective should remain to obtain world-wide condemnation of the Soviet action but to avoid becoming singled out as particularly hostile. We should need to consider our attitude on trade and on Ministerial and official visits to countries which had participated in the aggression and for the present such visits should be avoided. He had himself cancelled his planned visits to Hungary and Bulgaria but was prepared to carry out that to Rumania unless the Rumanian Government preferred him not to do so.

In discussion, there was general agreement with the action which had been taken to issue a Government statement on the previous day and with its terms. There was agreement also that our policy should be on the lines indicated by the Foreign Secretary. It did not appear that there was at present any threat to peace in Europe generally and the Soviet Government had been at pains to impress on NATO Governments the limited nature of the action that was being taken. We had been aware that forces were being concentrated on the borders of Czechoslovakia and were not therefore taken by surprise; but the NATO authorities were being careful to do nothing which might increase tension. So far there were no indications that a similar move was intended against Rumania. There was at present a general understanding that the West would not intervene against the Soviet Union in Soviet *bloc* countries and that Soviet intervention in Berlin or in a NATO country would involve risk of general war. At the same time, it was clear that the régimes in Eastern Europe, and particularly that in East Germany, only remained in power by the ruthless use of military force and of censorship. If the Soviet Union were to fail in her objectives in Czechoslovakia it was possible that the régimes in the surrounding countries would disintegrate. It was not yet clear, however, that the Soviet Union would be able to find Czechoslovak nationals willing to form a puppet Government and she might have to withdraw her troops. In that event the Czech people might not totally have lost. We should consider how far it would be in our interest, despite the risks involved, for the Soviet Government to fail and whether we could do anything to encourage the Czechs to insist on the authority of their legal Government and to press for the Russians to withdraw their troops. While we should not seek to stimulate the Czechs to resist, it would be right for us to ensure, in concert with other like-minded countries, that the facts of the situation both inside and outside their country were available to them, particularly in the next few days, before it became clear whether or not a puppet Government would be installed. There would be

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advantage also in arrangements being made, for example, by the Labour Party and the United Nations Association, for public demonstrations to be held in this country in support of the Czech people and Government and for the Government to provide speakers for them. It was important that, both in the forthcoming debate in Parliament and in demonstrations, the attitude of the British people as a whole should be made clear to the Soviet Government. We should consider whether our Ambassador in Moscow should be recalled for consultation and whether there would be advantage in using the "hot line" to Moscow to reiterate our attitude and to ask the Soviet Government, even at this late stage, to withdraw her forces from Czechoslovakia. In general our aim should be to secure the continuance of the existing Czech Government and the withdrawal of Russian troops, though on the understanding that the Czech Government would have to make some concessions to Russian opposition to the programme of liberalisation.

In further discussion, it was agreed that no final decision should be taken at present on whether or not we should recognise any puppet Government that might be installed in Czechoslovakia. This decision would have to be taken in the light of events in concert with our allies. For the present, however, we should continue to recognise the existing legitimate Government. As regards trade, we should adhere to our traditional attitude of not interfering unilaterally with it. Special consideration would, however, be needed of our attitude to the forthcoming Trade Fair at Brno, on which we should seek the views of the Czechs themselves, and of trade concessions which were being considered in relation to the Soviet Union. There were currently 1,000 Czech students in this country on a six weeks' visit as well as other Czech nationals. Arrangements would be made to extend their visas for a month at a time in the hope that the situation would by then have clarified; they would not be sent back against their will.

The Prime Minister, summing up the discussion, said that there was general agreement in the Cabinet with the action which had been taken so far in relation to events in Czechoslovakia. The likely future course of events was unclear and it might be that another meeting of the Cabinet would be necessary early in the following week to consider the situation further and in particular any question of the recognition of a puppet Government. If in the meantime any urgent action became necessary, he would consider it with the Foreign Secretary. It would be helpful if the transcript of the television interview which the Foreign Secretary had given on the previous evening could be circulated to all members of the Cabinet. Ministers intending to make statements about our policy in relation to Czechoslovakia should consult the Foreign Secretary. An urgent examination should be made of prospective visits by Ministers and officials and other sponsored individuals or parties for cultural and other exchanges to the countries involved in the aggression against Czechoslovakia. In so far as such visits had

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already been firmly arranged and were to our advantage, they should in general be allowed to take place though they would need to be carefully watched in the light of future developments. But no new arrangements for such visits should be made at present.

As regards trade relations, we should not seek to close the Soviet Exhibition in London prematurely and, subject to the advice of the Czech representatives in London and to no further deterioration in the situation, our participation in the Brno Trade Fair should be allowed to proceed. An examination should be made of the implications of recent events on our trade policy with the Soviet *bloc* generally, including in particular the relaxation that had been intended of our quota restrictions on Soviet imports into this country when the trade situation permitted this; the implications for our policy on strategic exports and on the strategic embargo should also be examined with a view to Ministerial consideration early in September. Consideration should also be given to the possibility of increased BBC broadcasts of factual material to Czechoslovakia and to the possibility that the "hot line" to Moscow might be used to reiterate to the Russian Government our attitude to their actions.

The Cabinet—

- (1) Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion.
- (2) Invited the Foreign Secretary:
 - (i) to arrange for the transcript of his television interview of the previous evening about Czechoslovakia to be circulated to all members of the Cabinet;
 - (ii) to arrange for an urgent examination to be made of prospective visits to the countries involved in aggression against Czechoslovakia on the basis indicated by the Prime Minister;
 - (iii) to arrange for the possibility of increased factual broadcasts to Czechoslovakia to be considered;
 - (iv) to consider whether there would be advantage in using the "hot line" to Moscow to reiterate our attitude on Czechoslovakia.
- (3) Invited the President of the Board of Trade to arrange for the Ministerial Committee on Commercial Policy and the Ministerial Committee on Strategic Exports to consider the implications of recent events on our policy in relation to the aggressor countries on trade and strategic exports respectively.
- (4) Invited the Lord Privy Seal to draw the attention of the leader of the prospective Parliamentary delegation to Bulgaria to the question whether it was desirable to proceed with the visit at the present juncture.