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SUBJECT: PRINCETON CONSULTANTS' DISCUSSION ON 18 AND 19 MARCH 1953 OF SE-39, "PROBABLE CONSEQUENCES OF THE DEATH OF STALIN AND OF THE ELEVATION OF MALENKOV TO LEADERSHIP IN THE USSR"(10 March 1953)

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PRINCETON CONSULTANTS' DISCUSSION ON 18-19 MARCH OF SE-39
"PROBABLE CONSEQUENCES OF THE DEATH OF STALIN AND OF
THE ELEVATION OF MALENKOV TO LEADERSHIP IN THE USSR"
(10 March 1953)

I. SUMMARY

1. The discussion focussed on the question of transfer of power in the USSR and, specifically, on whether and with what degree of risk the enormous power concentrated in Stalin personally could be transferred to a successor or successors. The majority of the consultants leaned to the view that, in the process of solving the transfer of power problem, the Soviet system would probably be weakened. In this respect, the majority departed from the view which has generally obtained in O/NE, that the transfer of power would probably be accomplished without weakening the continuity and effectiveness of the Soviet state.

2. Broadly speaking, two points of view emerged from the discussion:

a. The majority, with the degree of confidence varying with individuals, argued largely on the basis of historical analogy that the transfer of power might shake the Soviet system. They viewed the structure of power in the USSR as intensely personal. They said that Malenkov lacks the majesty of Stalin and is surrounded by ambitious and fearful men who, if they could, would challenge what appears to be his pre-eminent position. These consultants also believed that a man such as Malenkov, reared in the shadow of Stalin, may have qualities and deficiencies which would make it difficult for him to succeed to Stalin's power. These consultants conceded, however, that despite the dangers which they saw menacing the Soviet system, the transfer of power may nevertheless be effected without damage to the system.

b. The contrary view was based upon an analysis of Soviet society itself, and concluded that there was little or no prospect that the transfer of power would shake or

disrupt the Soviet system. These consultants said that historical precedents were not relevant because there was no historical example of a system of controls such as Soviet power had developed. These controls, they said, penetrated all the institutions of power in the society so that even if a personal struggle occurred on the top level it would be transient and would not affect the stability of the whole system.

II. THE PRINCIPAL ARGUMENTS

A. The Majority Position

3. Kennan began by stating flatly that any concept of solidarity or cooperative committee relationships among the men in the top ruling group was "utter nonsense." The relationships among these men had been marked throughout the Stalin era by extreme tension, the most delicate intrigue, and savagery. There were enormous possibility of violence implicit in this situation.

4. Moreover, there had been signs in recent months of a peak of tension which pointed to a power for struggle. It was possible that Malenkov was not Stalin's choice in the final weeks of his life; it was also possible that Stalin has been dead for some time and that a struggle has been going on in consequence of his death. The abolition of the Politburo at the 19th Congress was "an act of epoch-making significance," for which Stalin did not take personal responsibility. Molotov's attitude toward Malenkov in the funeral speeches was not the same as Beria's, which may mean that Molotov is at odds with the other two and that they cannot eliminate him now because he has support in the Party. The sudden prominence given the army, both before and after Stalin's death, suggests that Malenkov may be intriguing with the army for its support. The re-emergence of Zhukov fits this, for his earlier banishment was a personal act of Stalin. Kennan concluded that "whatever the apparatus of power is at this time, it is not unified."

5. Langer asked whether the doctors' plot, with its indirect attacks on Beria, had issued from a Stalin-Molotov combination against Malenkov and Beria. He speculated further that there might have been

a policy difference between the two factions, Stalin-Molotov representing a "cautious" element and Malenkov-Beria a "forward" element.

6. Kennan's reply was that the alignment of personalities suggested was quite possible, although the policy issue which might lie behind it was obscure. He felt that a divergence of views had developed within the Soviet heirarchy early in 1952 over the response which the USSR should make to developments in the West, particularly US rearmament and the possibility of West German rearmament. One school believed that these developments were of such a magnitude that the USSR must decide at once either to fight or to negotiate, and that the latter course was preferable. The other school felt that developments in the West did not involve such a threat and that the USSR could afford to sit tight. Kennan saw two indications to support his belief that there had been a struggle along these lines. One was the distinct impression he had in Moscow last summer that a studied effort was being made in certain quarters to keep him away from Stalin and Molotov, which he supposed was related to the issue of whether the USSR should negotiate with the US. The other evidence was that he detected a pattern of wavering in Soviet policy on Germany. He thought that the March note reflected a temporary victory of the "negotiation" camp, whereas the later notes withdrew the bid which was implicit in the March note. The Stalin article appeared to settle the issue, at least temporarily, for it stated that developments in the West did not constitute a threat, that war was not inevitable, and therefore, by implication, that negotiations were not necessary. It placed Soviet policy in the posture: "No concessions and no negotiations."

7. Sontag then summarized Kennan's position as follows: (a) there was evidence of a struggle for some time among the possible heirs of Stalin, and there was also evidence that this struggle had not been resolved at Stalin's death; (b) there was involved in the struggle a difference of views on policy toward the West; (c) the present structure of power represented a compromise which, given the nature of the relations among Communist leaders, is most unlikely to be maintained.

8. Kennan accepted this summary and then added a further observation. He said that much would depend on whether the West confronted the Soviet leaders with the necessity of making major policy decisions.

If they were so confronted, a great strain would be placed on their present relationships. Differences among the top leaders would then be reflected in the Satellite and other Communist parties, the leaders of which would not respond to Malenkov's authority as they had to Stalin's, so that a tremendous strain would be placed on the unity of the entire Communist movement.

9. Langer asked whether a Western initiative would not unite the leadership, since historically that had been the effect of a foreign threat upon a divided leadership. Kennan replied that a Western (US) move should not involve any threat. He said that Germany was a potentially divisive issue among the Soviet leaders, and he believed that a new Western proposal on Germany would split them wide open.

B. The Minority Position

10. In support of the view that the transfer of power was not likely to shake the Soviet system, Mosely offered a different version of what had been taking place in the USSR as well as a different picture of the nature of the Soviet power system. He believed that Stalin had given much thought to the succession problem and that he had placed Malenkov in a position to assume power with a minimum risk. The last real struggle for the succession had taken place between Malenkov and Zdahnov, and Malenkov had won. He had been intimately involved with the work of the Secretariat for at least 14 years. This was a key position, for it meant control of personnel from colonel up in the army, from the raion up in the Party, and from the managers of enterprises up in the bureaucracy. All personnel arrangements had been confirmed by the recent Congress.

11. Mosely agreed with Kennan that the doctors' plot had been a blow at Beria, but the announcement of it meant that the struggle was already resolved, not that one was in progress. The replacement of Abakumov by Ignatiev, a key personnel shift in Beria's sector of responsibility, showed that Beria's sector had been reprimanded, but not Beria personally. The aspersions cast on the security organs in the announcement of the doctors' plot was a way of conveying to the

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Party that Beria had subordinated himself in the power struggle. Mosely said he thought it possible that the Malenkov-Beria relationship had been worked out last spring and that the mention of prominent generals as targets of the doctors' plot was an attempt to convey that the leading figures in the armed forces were supporting Malenkov. Mosely did not regard the abolition of the Politburo and its replacement by an enlarged Presidium at the 19th Congress as significant. The Presidium contained the three elements which had always formed the top echelon of power: the leading personalities in the Politburo, the second string younger men in positions of great administrative responsibility, and the regional satraps. The important thing was that Stalin had wanted one dominant successor, and he had worked out the personal relationships so as to place Malenkov's hands on the levers of power.

12. This version drew a number of questions from those consultants who inclined toward the view outlined by Kennan. In replying to these questions, Mosely further clarified his position:

a. When asked to explain the perfunctory tributes paid to Stalin at his funeral and the apparently rapid deflation of the Stalin myth, Mosely replied that Malenkov was probably responding to a feeling in the party that the deification of Stalin had been overdone. (Kennan noted in this connection that in the last year or so there had been "strange hiatuses" in the press treatment of Stalin. He speculated that Stalin might have become "fed up with" the Malenkov-Beria combination and had been engaged in a struggle to destroy them. He thought it significant that Beria popped up into prominence as soon as Stalin died.)

b. When asked to explain whether Stalin's Bolshevik article had not undermined Malenkov's position, Mosely replied that he believed that the Bolshevik article

represented Malenkov's line toward Europe, i.e., the West was no threat and the USSR had room for maneuver (Malenkov's speech to the Congress). Mosely explained why the Bolshevik article had been published by speculating that Stalin had planned to give the article at the Congress as a speech, but that because of failing health he had been unable to deliver such a major address. His brief appearance was intended to sanctify the proceedings and to place a seal of approval upon Malenkov's report. (Here Kennan and others introduced the hypothesis that Stalin may already have been dead at the time of Congress and had been represented by a double.)

13. Strayer said he thought there were two principal flaws in Mosely's interpretation. It made it difficult to explain, first the rebuke to Beria before Stalin's death and then his sudden build-up after Stalin's death, and second, the abolition of the Politburo and the erection of the Presidium at the Congress, followed by what amounted to the restoration of the former after Stalin's death. Kennan added that he was sure there was no real power in the Presidium because it was too big. He pointed to the theses introduced by Kruschev at the Congress, which specified that the Secretariat, not the Presidium, would have control over personnel. This meant that the Presidium was a purely formal body and that Molotov prior to Stalin's death had not been in a position to exercise any influence over personnel.

14. Sontag asked whether it was possible to believe that a man who had struggled bitterly for power, as Stalin had done, would arrange a succession. The picture of an orderly transfer of power, simply out of a spirit of service to the cause, did not fit the history of revolutions. Mosely replied that the factor of Stalin's failing health due to heart trouble over a long period should be taken into account, for Stalin had probably long realized that he might have to relinquish power at any time.

15. Hoover said that basically he agreed with Kennan's thesis, but that he did not think that the Kennan and Fosely interpretations were incompatible. He thought that Malenkov was undoubtedly Stalin's choice, but he considered it most unlikely that Stalin would have actually transferred power as an irrevocable trust. The doctors' plot and the reversal of Congress decisions after Stalin's death indicated that the succession had not been decided and that Malenkov had to and actually did seize power. Although Malenkov held power now, there was a possibility that others who felt threatened might combine against him. Personal power was vastly more important to these men than policy differences. Malenkov undoubtedly felt the need to associate other top figures with himself temporarily, but in time he would wish to rid himself of them. If Beria or Molotov showed the slightest sign of disloyalty, blood would flow. There was therefore a potentially explosive situation, although none of the others would make the slightest challenge to Malenkov unless they could do so in combination. Kennan interjected Lenin's remark that Russian history alternated between "wild violence and the most delicate deceits." Hoover's personal guess was that Malenkov's chances of consolidating his power were good, for Malenkov was in a better position than Stalin after Lenin's death due to the control system which had been developed.

16. Sontag questioned whether a comparison with 1924 was valid, in view of the increased size of the Soviet empire, the complexity of the system and the pressures engendered by the effort to operate a planned economy under forced draft. Was it not possible that, in any such closely articulated structure, hesitations might be fatal, and therefore was it not true that personality was still decisive? Fosely replied that there had been a great administrative development since 1924 which made the system largely self-sustaining. It had weathered the shock of the great purges without a sign of breakdown. The control of key men from the Secretariat reduced the need for personal interventions.

17. Kennan said he believed that modern totalitarianism inevitably degenerated into personal dictatorship. Stalin had become more and more like Hitler. For the general population a myth could be built around Malenkov, and he could be fitted into Stalin's role with relative ease. For the people at medium levels in the apparatus of power, it was a real question; they had probably been left in a trauma by Stalin's

death and only gradually would they ask themselves whether his towering personality could be replaced. But at the very top level there was surely a terrific tension. We could not possibly predict whether they would resolve it in violence or by polite manouver. The injection of complicated problems of empire -- relations with Mao and the Satellites -- made the new relationship far more difficult.

18. Mosely replied that the key question was whether any struggle at the top level could result in an institutional clash: that is, whether any top leader in resorting to violence could call upon the army or the secret police as a unit. He did not believe this was possibile because of the interpenetrating nature of the controls in all the instruments of power. Malenkov had long operated this system based on the card indexes of the Secretariat. Mosely believed that he still controlled it and that therefore no institutional clash was likely.

19. Kennan said he thought the personal element in this control system ought not to be overlooked for it demanded continual juggling. He was convinced that Stalin maintained his power by an intentional preservation of instability and tension. In the last years of his life, he lacked the vigor to give the continuous attention which was required, and coagulation had developed in organizations of the state and the Party. If Malenkov had to compromise with institutional solidarities, he was lost.

20. Langer said that even if it were conceded that Malenkov had succeeded to Stalin's power, the real question was whether he could operate the system with the same skill as had Stalin himself. On the question of Malenkov's capacities, there did not seem to be enough evidence to form a judgment.

III. OTHER ISSUES

21. The consultants suggested modifications of SE-39 in several other respects:

a. Langer said he disliked the flat statement in paragraph 3 that the peoples of the USSR were "unlikely to participate actively" if a struggle for power should break out. He suggested that it be modified at least to read that " the peoples of the USSR are unlikely to initiate or to participate actively in the early stages of the struggle."

b. On the whole, there was an inclination among the consultants to believe, at least more than SE-39 conveyed, that Stalin's death might result in the weakening of Soviet controls in the Satellites and over Communist parties outside the Bloc. However, Hoover, Mosely, and Fahs opposed the majority on this. There was a similar division of opinion on the question of whether Tito had prospects for increased influence in the Satellites and other Communist parties. Kennan in particular held that Tito's influence would increase.

c. While there was no serious objection by any of the consultants to SE-39's statement on the probable effects of Stalin's death on Sino-Soviet relations, Langer thought it important to stress other factors than appeared in the paper. He argued that if no great change in Sino-Soviet relations were to be expected, it was primarily because (a) the two states would be held together by their common interest in the Korean war, and (b) China would long be dependent on the USSR for industrial aid and the Russians would wish to exploit this dependence to maintain effective influence. While not disputing the general position nor the argument under (a), Kennan said he thought that Russia could not give much industrial aid to China and that in addition Russian penetration and influence in China were far less than was generally believed.