

July 17, 1961

**Memorandum of Conversation between Jozip Broz
Tito and George F. Kennan**

Citation:

"Memorandum of Conversation between Jozip Broz Tito and George F. Kennan", July 17, 1961, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Belgrade Conference 7/61-11/61 folder, box WH-25, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. Papers, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, MA.
<https://digitalarchive.umd.edu/document/123195>

Summary:

Kennan reports on a conversation with Tito where they discussed the upcoming Belgrade Conference of Non-Aligned States.

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Transcript - English

CONFIDENTIAL

Desp. No. 39

From Belgrade

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

DATE: July 17, 1961

SUBJECT: World affairs; visit to Brazil; Belgrade conference

PLACE: Brioni

PARTICIPANTS: Jozip Broz Tito, President of Yugoslavia

George F. Kennan, American Ambassador

I visited President Tito this morning and talked with him for an hour and a quarter. It was the most informal and relaxed of the talks I have had with him. The only others in attendance were the Foreign Minister, Koca Popovic, and the President's personal secretary, Bogdan Crnobrnja. The President began by speaking Russian, and we continued in this language throughout the discussion.

An initial question by the President about my progress in the study of the Serbo-Croatian language led us, by stages, to the subject of his recent speech at Tito vo Uzice. The mention of this event brought us to the subject of the partisan warfare he had conducted from 1941 to 1945. The President seemed to enjoy the subject, and it detained us for some twenty minutes.

Turning to his present plans, he said that he expected to visit Brazil at some time during the current year, but did not yet know exactly when it would be. He thought Brazil was a very important country. He hoped we in the United States would be able to adjust our own relationship to Brazil in a constructive and satisfactory manner.

Talk turned on Brazil's participation in the forthcoming Belgrade conference.¹ I explained to him the nature of Cabot's interview² and told him that our Government had taken no position pro or con on the subject of the participation of other nations in the conference. He then inquired my personal opinion about the participation of Latin American nations. I said that this suggestion naturally raised some delicate questions. I personally thought that if it were a case of several Latin American nations, the significance attached to it would be less than if it were just one or two; but I emphasized again that my Government had carefully refrained from giving any advice to anyone, one way or another. He said that Yugoslavia would be very unhappy if Cuba turned out to be the only Latin American country to be represented.

He asked me how I felt about the conference, generally. I said that we took a very calm view of it. We knew that there would be some extremist voices there. On the other hand, we were confident that Yugoslavia would use her influence in the direction of moderation, and we knew that she would not be the only one. To this, President Tito agreed; but he said the greater the number of the moderate countries represented, the easier it would be for Yugoslavia. He stressed, emphatically and at considerable length, that Yugoslavia had no desire that the conference should in any way exacerbate international relations: on the contrary, he deeply hoped that its role would be to help the great powers find solutions to their problems. The question had been raised, he said, as to whether they were not preempting the role of the United Nations in holding such a conference. He felt that this was not at all the case - that they were merely acting to increase the usefulness of the voice which the unaligned nations could have at the forthcoming United Nations session.

I then took the liberty of saying that I had now been here two and a half months and had had some opportunity to acquaint myself with conditions in Yugoslavia. The impression I had, after this experience, was one of growing admiration for the country and the people and of a very strong feeling that our two peoples ought, by all criteria

of temperament and character, to be the best of friends. On the other hand I had become increasingly aware of the depths of some of the ideological differences, and the differences of outlook on world problems, which divided us.

This led to the subject of world affairs. The President said that their view on Germany was similar but not identical with that of the Russians. They knew the Germans well. They had suffered from them. They did not trust them. They continued to regret deeply the rearming of Western Germany. They recognized that this had occurred within the framework of NATO and was, therefore, not an immediate danger. But they were skeptical about the future. Some day the Germans would turn on NATO with the very arms NATO had given them. For this reason, they firmly favored a divided Germany. They made no bones about this. They did not want to see the country united. They did not want to see the military resources of Eastern Germany added to those of Western Germany. This meant that they had no choice but to support the Russian bid for recognition of the East German regime. They were sorry if this inconvenienced us; foreign policy was something one had to be consistent about.

I told him that I thought it was a very serious mistake of the Russians to try to portray the Adenauer regime as a Hitlerite regime, and emphasized my reasons for feeling that this was utterly misconceived. I mentioned the special feelings we have about the people of West Berlin, told him of my own five years of residence there and of how I had known them personally during the war as the least Nazi of all the German people, reminded him of the way they had stood by us during the Berlin blockade, and explained that we could not let them down. He replied that this was all very well, but he did not see, in this case, what prevented us from sitting down at a table with the Russians and talking the matter over. I pointed out that an atmosphere had arisen in which even the suggestion of negotiation with the Russians about Berlin smacked to many people of compromise and appeasement a la Munich. He said that the parallel was wholly misconceived. He thought, in fact, that we had been very unwise to heighten the atmosphere of military tension by talking about our military plans. He could understand that we might wish to take military measures, but he could see no reason why these measures should have been publicly advertised. Things were bad enough as it was.

We then spoke about the colonial problem and Africa. Much of what he had said, I had heard before. He spoke, this time, with great feeling. He said we Americans were always too late. The process of the disintegration of colonialism was marching with tremendous speed; no one could stop it; if there was not a prompt and adequate response, this could be very dangerous-dangerous for everyone, for us and even for them, the Yugoslavs. There was even a danger that they, too, would be too late. He asked us to bear this in mind when we judged Yugoslav policies toward Africa. They were trying to avoid this mistake.

I said that I thought we were doing all we could. In reply he mentioned Guinea. Here, he said (rather obliquely), was a place where we had a real chance of building a constructive relationship. I said I thought we had been giving aid to a number of African countries, including Ghana and Guinea. At the mention of Ghana, he shrugged his shoulders, indicating that was a special case. (I gathered that he thought Ghana was largely out of control and beyond influencing.) But much could still be done with Guinea.

He thought we had made a mistake in supporting our NATO allies so extensively on such questions as Algeria, the Congo, and Angola. Since he seemed unaware that we had opposed the Portuguese publicly on the question of Angola, I took pains to point this out to him; but I am not sure how well it registered.

I said that I felt that considerable injustice had been done to us by the Yugoslavs in their view of what had occurred in the Congo. They seemed to suspect us of having

inspired Mr. Hammarskjold to take positions in the Congo which were aimed at the preservation of the positions of the Belgians in that country. I could not imagine how they arrived at such a view; I was sure there was no substance to such suspicions.

To this Tito replied that it was true: they suspected Hammarskjold of acting in the interests of the Belgians and felt he had in many ways exceeded his authority. They also felt that our influence had played a part in bringing him to act in this manner. In general, Hammarskjold had taken much too much upon himself. He confessed that he could not warm to Hammarskjold personally-just didn't like him. They did not support Khrushchev's "troika" principle in its present form, but they thought that a stricter control ought to be exercised over the activities of the Secretary General. The latter ought not to act as an independent political figure.

I ended the talk by saying that I thought we were entering on a very serious and critical time, and they and we ought to be extremely careful, in this coming period, to assure that, even if we could not see things identically, at least misunderstandings were ruled out to the maximum degree. In the differences we had, there was a strong element of ideological preconception, which would not be straightened out in any short time. But there were also, I thought, certain differences which rested on real misunderstanding, and could be cleared away by the recognition and acceptance of a common set of facts. I hoped, for this reason, that they would not hesitate to give me an opportunity for explanation if there was anything in our policy that raised particular doubts or misunderstanding.³

Comment.

President Tito did not appear to me to be as robust as I had seen him on previous occasions. His Chief of Protocol intimated to me that he had still not fully recovered from his recent illness. His appearance and manner seemed to me to bear out this statement.

I had the feeling that Popovic⁴ and Crnobrnja, who spoke very little during the interview, were watching me very attentively throughout the interview in an effort to discern what was my reaction to the President-to his manner and his statements. I have the impression that these men, and others of his close advisers, entertain feelings of deep affection and admiration for him. Though they realize that his physical powers are not quite what they were, they intensely hope that a person like myself will be discerning enough to see in him the qualities they see and to share some of their respect for him.

If they knew my real thoughts, they would not, I think, be disappointed. Tito is a very human sort of a figure. He is a tough old revolutionary, who has faced extraordinary trials and has survived them all with remarkable success. In many respects, he has the temperament of a born military-political leader, with all the attendant faults and virtues. When he makes a decision, he has the courage to stick to it. His judgments about people are rough and ready-not always right, but usually not without shrewdness. Once he has recognized someone as an enemy, he is ruthless and consistent in combatting him, though not vindictive. By the same token, he will not betray a friend; nor is he easily led to turn on anyone who has once given him loyalty and support within the movement. He can be crafty, where necessary, but he has none of Stalin's refined hypocrisy and cruelty.

He is, of course, still in part the victim of ideological misconceptions. He himself admitted in our conversation that he had once been an extremist himself: circumstances, he said, had required this, though perhaps he, too, had not been as fast as he should have been in seeing the writing on the wall and in making the change. His Marxist prejudices still confuse him; and the historical experience of his people renders him abnormally sensitive to any suggestion of the oppression of a

smaller people by a larger one. But underneath all this, there lies an excellent, pragmatic political mind, not deeply philosophical, but exceptionally sensible and realistic. He has gained both stature and mellowness with the years.

In these circumstances, there is justification for the admiration and affection in which he is held by his younger associates; and those in the Western world who tend to regard him just another Gottwald or Gomulka, but one who happened to break loose from Moscow, are making a big mistake.