# May 30, 1963

# Memorandum of Conversation between Georgi M. Kornienko, Chargé d'Affaires of the Soviet Embassy, and Ronald I. Spiers, 'MLF, Disarmament'

## Citation:

"Memorandum of Conversation between Georgi M. Kornienko, Chargé d'Affaires of the Soviet Embassy, and Ronald I. Spiers, 'MLF, Disarmament'", May 30, 1963, Wilson Center Digital Archive, NARA, RG 383, Records of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, Entry UD WS-1343, box 1, Vol. VIII: Selected Memoranda, Telegrams, and Background Papers. Contributed to NPIHP by Bill Burr.
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## Summary:

In this conversation, Soviet diplomat Georgi Kornienko and State Department official Ronald Spiers discussed the Soviet objections to MLF. Kornienko argued that it would expose West Germany to “the nuclear disease” on the "road to disaster", but Spiers maintained that it would forestall the Germans from pursuing new nuclear programs.

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## Original Language:

English

## Contents:

EUR/RPM:RISpiers:cr
(Drafting Office and Officer)

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

6 pages.
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# Memorandum of Conversation



DATE: May 30, 1963
Time: 1:00 p.m.
Place: Soviet Embassy

XR Con-10

SUBJECT: MLF, Disarmament



PARTICIPANTS: Mr. Georgi M. Kornienko
Chargé d'affaires, Soviet Embassy

Mr. Ronald I. Spiers, EUR/RPM

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23

Mr. Kornienko invited me to lunch at the Soviet Embassy "to get up to date on what I had been doing" since we last met in March. He noted that I had just returned from the NATO Ministerial Meeting in Ottawa, where we had been "making history." He said that unfortunately the future would hold us responsible for the bad direction of this "history." U.S. pressure for the Multilateral Force was something all of us would regret in the future, since it could only result in bringing the Germans closer to having control over their own nuclear weapons. The MLF would worsen the international atmosphere, heighten international tensions and, accordingly, reduce the possibilities of reaching agreements between the US and USSR. (Smiling and shaking his finger at me, he charged that I had to bear some of this responsibility, since a change in U.S. policy on non-proliferation came about the same time I moved from disarmament to NATO matters.) Mr. Kornienko said there had been a "radical" change in December. Before, the Soviets understood our purpose in the MLF exercise as being to show our allies how expensive and difficult a nuclear capability was, in order to convince them to leave things as they were. After Nassau there was a clear effort to present the MLF as something desirable.

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I said that I wished my own superiors shared his assessment of my influence on the course of "history." Fact rather than modesty, however, forced me to admit that I was a latecomer to the MLF, which has been under discussion internationally for over two years. Nevertheless, I was personally a proponent of the MLF, since I was firmly convinced of the rightness of our non-proliferation policy. I continued to consider opposition to proliferation of nuclear weapons capability as one of the major areas of common interest between our two governments, and I still hoped that this common area of interest would allow us to build mutually beneficial agreements. He could only understand the MLF correctly if he saw it as an expression of this fundamental U.S. policy. He and his government would be mistaken if they read into our support for the MLF any basic change in our position. The MLF was at bottom a way of forestalling new national nuclear programs and this was one of the basic motivations for our support for it.

Mr. Kornienko said that he did not challenge the sincerity of this view but that he did challenge its objective correctness. He agreed with Walter Lippmann that our attempt to "vaccinate" the Germans against the nuclear disease by means of the MLF was a fundamental mistake, as we ourselves would realize in the future, when it was too late. The MLF would only result in the Germans' catching the nuclear disease. He understood that many of our NATO friends felt exactly the same way: these people were correct. He knew that the UK had many reservations on this score, as did the French. The US alone would have to bear the responsibility for creating the monster of a German nuclear capacity, since it was quite clear there was no enthusiasm for the MLF outside of Germany and the US was having to line up support. Greece and Turkey were unimportant and Italy would do whatever we wanted. He hoped that the US did not really believe that it was responding to "European" wishes. It was inevitable that German participation in the MLF and the physical contact with nuclear weapons which would result was a further step on the road to disaster. Von Hassel's statement, on arriving back in Germany, about the need for the US to relinquish its veto on the MLF in due course had been well noted by the Soviets and re-confirmed the correctness of their view. Five years ago he had listened to a discussion between two German journalists in which the future progress towards a German nuclear capability was outlined step-by-step, beginning with the presence on German territory of nuclear weapons initially under U.S. control, the sharing by Germany of decisions on use of nuclear weapons, and finally, an all-German nuclear capability. Developments in the intervening time had proved so far that these German newspapermen knew clearly how the German master plan would develop. What they predicted was coming true point by point. Whatever we said now, the US would not be able to resist the demands alluded to by Von Hassel that the MLF be goverened by a majority vote. The Germans would be a majority stockholder and their effort would be to convince

everybody that fairness required a majority voice for them. They would be successful in this effort. The Germans would be able to use what they learned as participants in the MLF for their own nuclear program in the future. This was not just a distorted fear of the Soviet Union: many NATO journalists and officials shared this view entirely.

I asked Mr. Kornienko whether the Soviet Union would prefer a German national nuclear program or a combined Franco-German program to the MLF. I recognized that we disagreed about the prospects of such developments coming about but I thought he was badly mistaken if he believed that the Germans would be content with the status quo indefinitely. I also wanted to correct an impression he had about the MLF arrangements: Weapons in the MLF would be made in the US and protected to prevent unauthorized disclosure of information allowing participants to learn how to make nuclear weapons on their own. The MLF was not to be a device for indirect dissemination of nuclear design information. Mr. Kornienko said that technically this may be what we have in mind but as a practical matter this was not a system which could be preserved indefinitely. I asked him what the Soviet Union would do in this situation. Mr. Kornienko said, "Sign a non-proliferation agreement." If the UK, France, the US and the USSR were to sign such an agreement -- one without loopholes -- the situation would be far better and the problem of an MLF would not arise. Germany and China would probably have to sign such an agreement (although we would have to ask these countries directly), but even if they did not, the obstacle which it presented would be a firm one. Certainly this would be worth a try. Obviously no one could guarantee that "in a hundred years" Germany or China would not become nuclear powers, but the Soviet Union was a practical country, interested in the developments of the next decade or so. He did not feel that U.S. officials truly understood that the establishment of the MLF would be a serious setback to those who sought an improvement in US-USSR relations. The Soviets realized that we could "push" the UK and others into it but we should clearly know the responsibility that we were undertaking in so doing. I said the MLF was not just a negative anti-proliferation device. In our view there were other positive reasons for it: it would be a plausible military weapon to counter the nuclear threat to NATO Europe from Soviet nuclear forces. In this sense the MLF would fulfill a military need for the West. Secondly, it would be significant politically as a way of giving concrete expression to the solidarity of the Atlantic countries: this was one of the virtues of mixed-manning apart from its being a safeguard against use of the force for purely national purposes.

Noting that this was only a "subordinate question," Mr. Kornienko asked whether the force was or was not to be disguised as merchant ships. I recalled that we had tried to clarify this point in our response to the Soviet April 8 note. He said that despite what we had said, the press and others repeatedly referred to "merchant vessels."

I asked why the Soviets seemed to be so interested in a NATO-Warsaw non-aggression pact (NAP). Mr. Kornienko said that in present circumstances some kind of an agreement between the East and West was important. The NAP, in and of itself, was not very significant, but it would be a useful symbol. He did not understand why some NATO members, including the US, opposed this. He knew that some of the NATO members favored such a pact and expressed the confidence that this view would prevail. I said that there seemed to be three major categories of objections to an NAP: (1) the legal problems relating to recognition of East Germany; (2) a philosophical distaste for a Kellogg-Briand kind of approach in international relations, where the word was taken for the deed; and (3) a suspicion that such an agreement, once concluded, might be used by some to make more difficult actions in the military field which the West might feel it necessary to take to improve their self-defenses, and which could be mis-characterized as "aggressive" and therefore contrary to the agreement. Nevertheless, the US was always open to consideration of any real possibility for reducing tensions. Our problem was that we did not believe that an NAP, in isolation, represented such an opportunity. Mr. Kornienko said that the legal problem could be managed to our satisfaction. He agreed that any agreement was a "piece of paper" but that if such an agreement served mutual interests it could be a useful step. All things considered, the Soviet Union believed that an NAP could be such a useful step at this time and that it should be seriously discussed. He recognized that the French and the Germans particularly were opposed to such an agreement, although he hoped that the wiser counsels would prevail in NATO.

I asked whether abandonment of the MLF would be a pre-condition for an NAP, as it now seemed to be for a non-proliferation agreement. Mr. Kornienko said that an NAP would be useful in and of itself, apart from the MLF question. I said that I thought personally there were two areas in which agreement could be achieved and which would be of much more substantial importance: the non-proliferation question and the nuclear test ban question.

Mr. Kornienko said that as a result of the Rusk-Gromyko talks in Geneva in March and April of 1962, the Soviets had concluded that a non-proliferation agreement was a real possibility. However, the situation changed radically when the US shifted its position and began to push for an MLF. The present U.S. formula for a non-proliferation agreement would in fact require the Soviets to "approve" the MLF, and this was out of the question. I reverted to his earlier expression of fear that the MLF was just one step toward a German independent nuclear capability. If these fears were sincere, a non-proliferation agreement such as we had proposed should be viewed favorably by the USSR, since it would effectively stop further development in the direction of German national control of nuclear weapons. This is an opportunity which should not be missed, since we

believe our major allies would be prepared now to support an agreement such as we had proposed, and this may not always be the case. I expressed the hope that we had not reached an impasse on this subject, since we could not afford to reject the few possibilities which presented themselves to improve relations. I asked whether, if the Soviets concluded that the MLF was going to go ahead anyway, they might be prepared to accept the formula we had suggested. Mr. Kornienko said that the Soviets were "realists" and he would not say that an agreement would be out of the question with the passage of time and when such an agreement would not be taken as Soviet acceptance of the MLF. I said that time was a precious commodity and I assumed this subject was being carefully considered since, in Mr. Kornienko's own view, the problem with which our proposal was designed to deal was a real one. The Soviets could not, on the one hand, object to the MLF as a step in an undesirable direction and, at the same time, reject an agreement which would forestall evolution in the direction they feared. Mr. Kornienko agreed that this was a good point.

I asked how he felt about the test ban. Mr. Kornienko said he was very pessimistic. He had been back in Moscow in April and none of his colleagues who had supported the idea of such an agreement had much hope. They were bitter because they had been "deceived" by the US, deliberately, they felt. He himself had been told more than once by highly placed U.S. officials that the question was only one of principle; if the Soviets just accepted the principle of on-site inspection, agreement would be possible. One U.S. official had even said that one inspection would suffice. These reports had led to a hot and heavy argument in Moscow and many people had gone out on a limb in the deep conviction that if they accepted mandatory on-site inspection, the test ban question would be solved. These officials had been seriously embarrassed and discredited by the U.S. deception.

I said that to my knowledge no one had been authorized to convey the impression which the Soviets claim to have received, although admitting that our emphasis on the principle of on-site inspection might have been misread by some as a belief on our part that numbers were unimportant. However, Soviet officials acquainted with the US must have recognized that this was a heavy political question on both sides. I certainly could have told him at that time that no U.S. Administration could have just "accepted" a Soviet position which they had held practically at the beginning of the nuclear test talks. This would have been rightly characterized as outright capitulation to the Soviets and a rewarding of Soviet intransigence and the reversal and re-reversal of their position on inspection. Unlike Mr. Kornienko, however, I continued to be an optimist on this question. Certainly there was some ground which might involve a little more give on his side which would allow us to approach an agreement. Of all of the outstanding issues, this was substantively the most important area and, to borrow a Soviet phrase, this was the one that was

"ripest" for agreement. I could not conclude that under no circumstances would the Soviets move further on this question. How could the question of three versus seven inspections spell the doom for something of such potentially historic importance? Since today seemed to be a day to talk of history, history would hold us accountable if this opportunity were passed by. I did not believe that it was impossible to work out the important question of modalities of inspections; I still remember Tsarapkin's comment in Geneva, when we first tabled our annex describing inspection procedures, that there was much common ground. With good will these modalities could be settled and this would leave us with the question of numbers. The Soviet Union had to be understanding of the political realities for the US. The US could not accept three. The Soviets say they cannot accept seven and therefore, so far at least, a test ban stays just out of reach.

I noted that we had discussed three areas of possible agreement: a test ban, non-proliferation and NAP. Perhaps one would come to think of a combination of such elements plus other possible steps. If the Soviets were truly interested in finding areas of agreement there were certainly real possibilities for important accomplishments.

Mr. Kornienko noted that it appeared many of my disarmament colleagues were following my footsteps out of disarmament. I asked if the Soviets have an agent in our personnel department. Mr. Kornienko said this was not necessary, but that his people follow these things very closely: does this mean we have no hope for disarmament? I replied that this was a matter of normal turnover, plus a feeling on the part of a number of old hands that their responsibilities and scope for initiative was submerged in the new organizational structure and influx of personnel. My personal belief was that the next two or three years would not see much progress in disarmament. However, over the longer term, this subject would be a major one on the world agenda: the open-ended costs of modern weapons, their accelerating pace of obsolescence, the lack of net increase in security despite mounting armaments would force statesmen of both of our countries to treat this subject with much more seriousness than they do today. I thought the disarmament problem would be with us for some time, and become less and less academic. Mr. Kornienko nodded agreement.