

STATE PAPERS Belfast and Dublin

Shock at Soviet concern for political prisoners

BRITISH foreign secretary Sir Geoffrey Howe was "astounded" after his Soviet counterpart Eduard Shevardnadze expressed concerns about Diplock trials and 'political prisoners'.

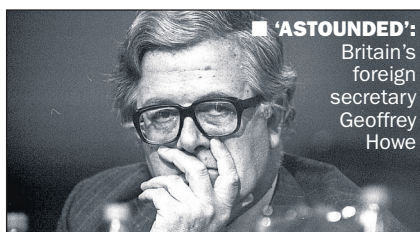
High-level Soviet concern at the alleged existence of "400 political prisoners" was raised at a bilateral meeting in Moscow in 1988.

Previous confidential files released by the Public Record Office in Belfast, reveal Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze, below, "expressed concern about alleged abuses of human rights in Northern Ireland", arguing "the absence of jury trials for certain offences was a basic infringement of individual freedom".

According to a confidential memo detailing the exchange, dated February 18 1988, Mr Shevardnadze said the Soviet Union "was concerned about the situation in Northern Ireland... They [the Soviets] were concerned that there were more than 400 political prisoners in Ulster".

The politician said the USSR had received representations about many serving terms under sentences which they believed were illegal and contrary to their rights, saying such trials "seemed very much out of step with international and European processes".

He then handed over a list of names,



asking Mr Howe to look at them and see whether their sentences were justified.

According to the memo, Mr Howe said he was "astounded" by the minister's remarks.

"There was no question of political prisoners. Nobody was imprisoned in the UK except on proof of the commission of a crime before a proper court" and courts in the Republic of Ireland also tried comparative criminal offences in no-jury courts "since both countries faced the same threat of intimidation of witnesses and jurors by terrorists".

Sir Geoffrey agreed to look at the list but did not accept the validity of the allegations made by Mr Shevardnadze.

According to the memo, Mr Shevardnadze said while the secretary of state was a professional lawyer "he still failed to understand some of the arguments", insisting "he was far from

sure that all the 400 [prisoners] were terrorists".

In a note on the file, Stephen Leach of the NIO reported: "By all accounts the Soviet foreign minister ended up with considerably the worst of the argument."

It was concluded the request "was clearly meant as a tit-for-tat measure linked to the UK's entirely justified interest in human rights cases in the Soviet Union".

In another memo Clare Marson, an NIO official in Belfast, provided details of the eight named prisoners whose cases were raised. Of these, seven were serving life sentences for murder and one for attempted murder.

The prisoners were all incarcerated at the Maze Prison. They included Paul Martin Creighton, sentenced for the murder of a man during an IRA feud in 1975; Michael Culbert, imprisoned for his part in the 1978 murder of a police photographer and John Anthony McCooey who, she stated, with accomplices, had murdered five Orangemen at Tullyvallen Orange Hall in Co Armagh in 1976.

A brief was prepared for the Soviet foreign minister stating: "There are no political prisoners in NI. Convicted terrorists were treated in the same way as all other prisoners."

NIO feared satellite would self-destruct and fall on north

THE danger that a Soviet satellite might self-destruct over Northern Ireland troubled the Northern Ireland Office in 1988. Previously confidential government papers reveal in a minute to the secretary of state Tom King on October 25 1988, W Pugh noted that ministers were advised on September 13 of a possible emergency situation if the out-of-control nuclear-powered Russian satellite, Cosmos 1900 fell on the north.

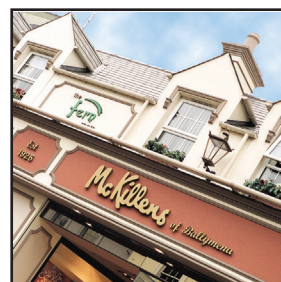
"Ministers will be glad to learn that the perceived danger passed with the burning-up of the satellite body over the Congo on re-entry on October 1 1988," he said. Information confirmed the satellite's automatic safety mechanism had worked, separating the satellite body from the reactor and core which subsequently also divided.

Mr Pugh explained: "The reactor body is now in orbit at a height of 700-800 kilometres where it is



expected to remain until it falls back to earth in around fifty years with some debris reaching the earth's surface."

The satellite had been tracked on a line between Tory Island in Co Donegal and Bournemouth during the two minutes it took to cross the British Isles during its final orbit. It eventually burnt up over west Africa and it was agreed that NI's contingency arrangements should be reviewed to face any future satellite threats.



McKillens®

UK & IRELAND AWARD WINNING FOOTWEAR RETAILER

SPECIAL NEW YEAR

SALE

STARTS WED 30th DECEMBER

SELECTED LADIES' FOOTWEAR &
SELECTED MEN'S & CHILDREN'S FOOTWEAR

ALL LADIES' AND CHILDREN'S SALE FASHIONS

ALL SALE LEATHER GOODS AND GIFTWARE

NOW 1/2 PRICE

*We would like to wish all our
customers a Happy New Year*

CLOSED FRIDAY 1st JANUARY 78 - 94 Church Street Ballymena

Following Yonder Star

ALL NIGHT CANDLELIT VIGIL

FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY

St Mary's Chapel, Chapel Lane, Belfast

Tue 5th Jan 10 p.m. - Wed 6th Jan 7 a.m.

For peace in
the world and peace
for every child,
born and unborn

All Night Adoration
Rosary
Midnight Mass

Entrance via St Mary's
Hall, Marquis St.

Nollaig
Beag



"There is a child born to us, a Son given to us...and He will be called Wonder
Counsellor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace". Is 9:6