

EAST-WEST RELATIONS

by Geoffrey Pearson

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It is often remarked by visitors to the USSR from the West that the Russians are really "just like us" but suffer the unpleasant fate of living in a political environment which is quite different from ours. Those who have lived in the USSR may respond that first impressions are misleading and that brief encounters at whatever level, including the summit, are more likely to delude than to enlighten. First impressions sometimes provide insight which is subsequently lost. We persist in speaking of East and West, for example, so that one is surprised to find that Russia is of the "West," although the Soviet Union is not. Leningrad is as much a part of the culture of the West as Paris or Rome. Moscow is far from Europe, but the urban landscape and the life style of young people are typically European. There is a nostalgic air of the fifties about the crowded dance floor in the provincial hotel. In the same way the Russian passion for Hemingway and Faulkner brings back memories of another time. Tolstoy would not have been surprised (although certainly offended) by this deceptive familiarity. It was the Russians, after all, who believed they were saving Europe from Napoleon, the man described in *War and Peace* as a barbarian from another shore. The Moscow Circus is a combination of night club and music hall. The clowns provide the commentary on the follies of society. Our assumption that this would be incompatible with Soviet morality forgets that the role of the court jester is universal.

I... believe there is evidence that common ground exists and can be gradually enlarged. The first common interest is clearly mutual survival. Soviet policy has come increasingly to give priority to this goal, with its implication of "live and let live," both in the military and political sense. The joint interest in stopping the proliferation of nuclear weapons to other countries, and in radical reductions of stockpiles is both genuine and growing. So too is the interest in preventing an accident or mis-communication, as recent proposals for joint control centres demonstrate.

Associated with this interest are concerns about regional conflict and world order, which are driven in part by the growth of terrorism. It may well be that Soviet policy is moving towards traditional Western views of conflict control through third party settlement and mediation, especially in the Middle East[T]here is reason to believe the Soviet Union will continue to advocate prudence to its friends and to be ready to cooperate quietly with its so-called enemies.

A third emerging area of joint interest is disaster relief, whether it be famine in Africa or the pollution of the oceans and forests. The USSR occupies twelve percent of the surface of the earth. It has immense reserves of fuel and minerals. It stands to lose much from degradation of the environment, and it contributes to such degradation. Equally, it depends more than most countries on imports of food, whether grain from the West or fish from the world's oceans.

Some of these kinds of mutual interests began to be explored in the era of détente, and had significant effects on Soviet perceptions. Then the conflict of interests resumed its preponderant place in the arena of public attention, although the fear of nuclear war has remained a strong deterrent to rash behaviour. But now we are at a turning point again, as a new Soviet leader looks for ways of breaking with the past. The twenty-seventh Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1986 could be the most important since that of 1956, when Khrushchev set a new course. Scholars, serious journalists, and the interested public in the West should take this opportunity to look anew at the myths and realities of the relationship of East and West.