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EAST-WEST RELATIONS: VALUES, INTERESTS AND PERCEPTIONS

by Geoffrey Pearson

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"All nations are made up of the people they comprise, and behave according to the traditions, values and outlook of that people. Unfortunately, the West seems to have forgotten this truism in dealing with the Soviet Union."

Michael Binyon,
Life in Russia p. 8,
Panther Books, 1985.

The meeting between President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev in Geneva on November 19-21, 1985 may herald yet another beginning in the post-war history of East/West relations. Once again, an American President and American citizens must reconcile new images with old assumptions about the nature and course of the great conflict which dominates the nuclear age, assumptions which President Reagan had done much to solidify in the minds of these same citizens. Once again, no doubt, a new Soviet leader is asking himself whether the Soviet view of Western intentions conforms to what he has seen and heard in the privacy of a personal encounter. There is no assurance that policy will change on either side, or if it does, that new directions of policy will endure for long. The record in fact shows a cyclical rather than a linear pattern of development. The obstacles to mutual understanding remain formidable, based as they are on real differences of interest, opposing conceptions of the good society and the role of the state, and prevailing misperceptions of what each country and system means in relation to the other.

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. Such is the depth of suspicion on both sides, that friendships can rarely survive the rigours of a political climate which is aptly known as the cold war. Thus it is confusing when the leaders emerge from several hours of private conversation in an apparently friendly mood. Are first impressions perhaps right after all, or is this encounter, too, a charade which both will soon abandon?

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 the Russians are 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 styles 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 as 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 description of whom in *War and Peace* is that of a barbarian from another shore. The Moscow Circus is a combination of night club and music hall, with the clowns providing the commentary on the follies of society which we, in the West, have assumed is incompatible with Soviet morality, forgetting that the role of the court jester is universal.

So too, one is surprised by the amount of coverage given by Soviet television to the world outside, and by the great interest, indeed passion, of ordinary people to know more about it. They already know more about us than we know about them, if one can

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