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IMPRESSIONS OF THE RUSSIANS AND THEIR LEADERS

Address given by the Secretary of State for External Affairs, Mr. L. B. Pearson, at Women's Canadian Club, Chateau Laurier, Ottawa, December 8, 1955.

I must thank you first, Madam President, for your kind introduction and for your discriminating, indeed, your flattering recital of facts about my career. I need hardly say that I am very happy to be with you on this occasion to tell you something about my impressions on the trip which I have been recently privileged to undertake to the Soviet Union and to some countries in South-East Asia. On that trip we visited not only Russia but also, and for the greater part of our time, countries in South-East Asia. Yet I find on my return that nobody wants me to talk about anything but Russia. I have not had such a magnificent opportunity to talk in reply to questions since, I think, I returned as a soldier from the First War. Everyone wanted to know then what the war was like. Now they want to know what the Soviet Union is like, and I feel just about as incapable of answering that question as the earlier one, so many years ago.

I am not sure that in the verdict of history, and we won't get that for a good many generations, it will not be found that of the two great revolutions of our time - the Soviet Communist revolution of 1917 and the revolution taking place in Asia where hundreds of millions of people are emerging from the sleep of centuries, that of the two, the latter one, the results of which we do not yet see ultimately have far more reaching consequences for the world. The people of Asia have now become aware of modern industrial programs and they are determined to do better for themselves than has been done for them over the past 150 years; both in the search for political freedom and in that for a better life.

I felt it was a real privilege to see what had happened in that part of the world since I was there last, as well as to take part in the Ministerial Meeting of the Colombo Plan. I was inspired by what I heard and saw there and by the way this Colombo Plan is working out. We, in Canada, have, I think, made a respectable contribution to that Plan and I assure you that it is appreciated by countries like India and Pakistan and Ceylon, where it is in operation. It is not only a matter of material aid to these countries, helping them to help themselves to reach a better material standard of life, it is not only that which they appreciate, but the understanding and the sympathy and the political cooperation which we, who are privileged to participate in this Plan, are showing these peoples.

I hope we will continue to support the Colombo Plan. And I am sure that in this country we will not only continue to do so but be able to increase that support, especially at this time when grandiloquent, if ambiguous offers of help and sympathy are being thrown at these people from other quarters. The plan provides an important way to show not only our willingness to contribute materially but our desire to understand and appreciate the problems with which they are faced; and they are certainly faced with tremendous problems, complicated and difficult, in countries like India, and Pakistan.

So far as the Russian part of our trip was concerned I should say at once, as I have already said since I returned, that we were given a magnificent reception. We were shown every kindness by a people who are naturally kind and generous. Of course the official "red carpet" was out, and of course the people who looked after us officially had been told, and I am not criticizing this, had been told to make us welcome and to be kind to us and to give us everything possible to eat and to drink! But while making this qualification that we were official visitors, I got the impression that those who were told to look after us in this way got a great deal of genuine pleasure out of carrying out that kind of instruction.

Therefore the feeling I got from this expression of kindness on the part of our hosts was that if we could only somehow get through to the people of a country like this, so many of our problems could be solved. But that "if" is a very big "if" indeed. There is a great gap, I suppose there is some kind of gap in all countries, between people and governments. I hope, indeed, I am sure it is a narrow gap in the free democracies. I cannot, however, say that of a totalitarian government. Therefore the kindness and generosity of the people has only a qualified political significance. The difficulty of getting through to the people behind their government and their leaders and convincing them that we share their expressions of friendship, was shown very clearly at the recent Foreign Ministers' Conference at Geneva when the effort on the part of the Western Ministers to bring about increased contact and freedom of communications between peoples was met on the other side by flat refusals.

I am also asked by my friends what other impressions did I get apart from the impression of kindness, generosity and great hospitality. It is not an easy question to answer because we were only there 8 days. Though 8 days in Russia may be long enough in which to write a book, it is not long enough really to get to know the country. Someone once wrote a book about the Russian revolution which was entitled "Ten Days That Shook The World". If I ever do write a book about my visit to Russia it will be the "Eight Days That Shook The Pearson's"

Well, of course, we got impressions. But impressions based on a short and on an official visit are not very sound foundations for conclusions and judgments. I think, however, that they are of value for a person in my position because it gives you an opportunity to check from first-hand evidence some of the judgments and conclusions you had previously reached on the basis of information received and of study you had made. Also our

impressions were possibly a little more valuable than they otherwise would have been because of the fact that we were on an official visit and therefore were able to see and talk with the leaders of the Soviet State. That was a privilege indeed, in the sense that it made it a little easier to understand the sources of Soviet power and the nature of that power. The result was not always reassuring but it was valuable.

My abiding impression, and I have said this already since my return from Russia, was one of great power on the part of the state, of massive power, massive strength, indeed of great collective wealth and of inflexible purpose. It is a socialist society, of course, and because of that it starts from the collective and works to the individual. That was dramatized for me when I visited Stalingrad -- a city which had suffered so terribly in the war and the bravery of whose people and of the soldiers who defended it has become legendary. This city has shown almost as much courage in reconstruction as it did in war, but the reconstruction began with collective enterprises - schools - theatres - parks - offices, and all that kind of thing, even at a time when the people were living in deplorable conditions. Only afterwards did they move from the collective to the individual and begun to take care of his problems such as housing. In our society, based on the individual, and rightly so, we start from the individual and work to the collective. I think we might gain a little from their approach, though we should not go too far, by emphasizing more in our society its collective side, though not of course at the expense of the individual.

Then I also got the impression, as every visitor does, the impression of total control on the part of the government; the omnipotence and omnipresence of the state; and may we be saved from that in this country! That is their system. Complete subordination of the individual, it is stifling and crushing to us but it does not seem to be so stifling or crushing to them.

Also we should not forget that the deprivations which the individuals there suffer, if "suffer" is the right word, would seem very difficult for us who are accustomed to a high standard of material living and where the luxuries of today become the necessity of tomorrow. They would be deprivations to us but they are not to the Russian because he has no other standard of comparison than that which he experienced in the past. By that basis of comparison his condition is improving.

He also has no other standard of political comparison than the conditions which existed in the past. Therefore, it is not a comparison with our freedom, so he may not feel the political deprivations which would mean so much to us in this free country.

One certainly does not get the impression after visiting Russia that they are a beaten, servile, lifeless people. One does not even get the impression that they miss their freedom as we would miss it. Indeed they have a kind of freedom; if you obey the dictates of the state you are free to do everything you wish to do within those limits. It is not our freedom but it is a kind of freedom.

As somebody has put it - I think it was Mr. Attlee, we have the freedom to make decisions which govern our lives, they have freedom from the necessity of making decisions. There are people, I fear who get as much comfort out of that kind of freedom as the other. It is one of the tasks of free democracies to keep to a minimum that kind of person in the state.

Another impression I got was that, because of state control of the mass media of propoganda and communication, and this is not so difficult to understand in a totalitarian despotic government, they have built up in many of their people great pride in their state accomplishments. This is something which we are inclined to ignore, but which was driven in on us all the time.

Furthermore the people -- (I am not talking about the group that is governing the people) claimed to have a passionate desire for peace.

When in Moscow we expressed a wish to go to a Protestant church service. It was only necessary to express that kind of wish to have it met, so we were taken on Sunday evening to a Baptist Church. That church was almost as crowded as this room; indeed even more so because there were so many people they could not sit down. I could not flatter myself that it was due to my presence because they did not know that any visitors from the West were coming. But when I was led into the church, not through the front door because we couldn't get in that way, but through the back door, I was put in the pulpit with the Minister. When we entered they were singing a hymn and when they had stopped the Minister began to speak in Russian. Our Ambassador who speaks Russian very well, said "He is introducing you". There was a certain flutter of excitement among the congregation. Then the Ambassador said "Do you know what he is saying now". I replied, "How should I know, I don't understand Russian". Mr. Watkins said, "He is telling them you are going to preach to them." "Well", I said, "you had better tell them that I am not." He replied, "You will have to say something because he has told them that you would preach and it would be very disappointing." After all my father was a minister and my grandfather also, so I ought to be able to preach a sermon, quite apart from the fact that I am a politician. So I felt I ought to do something about it. I had also this advantage, I would say a few words and then they had to be translated into Russian. So this gave me a little time to think what the next few words would be.

I thought, looking into the faces of these people -- strong, patient, good faces; mostly, but not all, of elderly people, that a safe text to use in talking to this Russian congregation would be "Blessed is the Peacemaker". I assure you it was a safe and satisfactory text.

After I finished my few remarks they spontaneously broke into a hymn, the tune of which I very well knew. They sang it in Russian but the words, when translated, were "Rescue the Perishing". I am not sure therefore whether my sermon had been a success or not!

When you see and hear people like that, when you listen to people in the cities of Stalingrad and Leningrad which suffered so much from war, listen to them talk about their passion for peace, it is very difficult not to believe in their sincerity. I am sure they are genuine in that belief.

But I do not get very much comfort out of that because a passion for peace among the people (and the people in all countries want peace) is not very important unless it can express itself in political action, in policies on the part of those who govern the people. Therefore, it is far more important to try to answer the more difficult question. Do the small closely knit group (at least closely knit at present) which governs these 175 million people, do they want peace? If so are they trying to put into effect policies that make for peace? That is the question that means so much and they have the right to ask the same question of us. Indeed they asked it of me several times.

When they talked about peace and tried to tell me it was their only desire, I was not as convinced as I was about the feeling of the people themselves. Yet I think it is probably true that they do desire peace, I am talking of the rulers now, or at least a peaceful interlude. I have come to that conclusion because of two factors. One is that when the two men who are running Russia now, (they say all are equal in the Russian politbureau but I should say the two who are "more equal" than the others are Mr. Khrushchev and Mr. Bulganin) claim their devotion to peace, they may really want a peaceful interlude because they are hard, realistic men, not suicidal fanatics like Hitler, and they know that the alternative of peace if it takes the form of World War III is hydrogen extermination.

They have the hydrogen bomb - they told me about it. They know the effect of the hydrogen bomb. They know the Americans could create the same effect from their bombs. So I suspect they do not want that kind of alternative to peace.

There is another reason. Mr. Khrushchev said to me on more than one occasion - "We want peace because we can win the conflict between the two systems, your system and our system, without war. So if the communist system will prevail without war, we would be very stupid to go to war."

If they feel that way, if they have that confidence, and they make great profession of that confidence, it is up to us to show them that it is not justified: that in this struggle of competitive coexistence which we are facing, their system will not prevail.

We know our system is stronger. We know it deep down in our hearts - because it is based on the free man. But by that very token they say they will prevail because our freedom in the Western world is degenerating into license and luxury and laziness. Their system, based on total control and 100% discipline produces a people who are patient, strong and willing to accept sacrifices for the state. Again it is up to us to prove that they are wrong.

There was another word we heard a lot in Russia; fear. We talk a lot, and with justice and with reality, about our fear of Communist imperialism. We have good reason to fear it by the record of the last ten years. They talk equally and emphatically of their fear, not only their fear of war but their fear of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization which they claim to be an aggressive anti-Soviet bloc; even more of their fear of the United States of America using this Organization for its own aggressive purposes.

They concentrate their fear on our neighbour to the south. It may well be that this fear is also genuine, among the people. They have no other source of information than that which is fed to them by the state in order to secure a particular result. Because they have no way of checking the truth of the information they get, it would be surprising if believing in or at least being exposed to that kind of propaganda, they did not fear the United States.

Their ignorance of the Western world, and especially of North America, is total and dangerous. If somehow we could remove that ignorance, as I said earlier, and get into contact with the people through honest, genuine information, things would be a lot better.

The leaders, however, who do not have to believe their own propaganda, claim that they also fear the United States. Every time I got into an argument with one of them on this score and it was one of our favourite subjects for argument, he would pull out of his pocket some press clipping which would be based on a Tass despatch from the United States or Canada and which stated that somebody over here had said that we are going to do something very unpleasant to the Russians. These despatches would be edited, I suppose, and the effect they would create among the people would be bad. Even the leaders might be impressed by certain talk in the States and in other Western countries. It is just possible therefore, though not probable, that their fear might be genuine. You see it is very difficult for a Communist leader, or a Communist follower, to believe that anything that appears in a newspaper is not from an official source, and inspired by the Government of the country.

It is also just possible that they may, by a process of auto-intoxication, have come to believe their own propaganda which is based on creating fear of the United States. Or it may be that these people are just trying to rationalize and justify their own aggressive policies by trotting out this fear bogey of the United States and the Western world which has caused so much alarm. But whatever the reason is, their ignorance, genuine or calculated, is one of the most dangerous factors in the present situation.

I know of no better illustration of this than the present visit to India and Burma of these two Soviet leaders - Marshal Bulganin and Mr. Khrushchev. Statements which they have been making in India and Burma display an ignorance and insult the intelligence of the people whom they are addressing and whose guests they are. For instance, when Mr. Khrushchev said, and he is a very frank

speaker, frank almost to the point of crudity -- when he said that in 1941 the United Kingdom organized and arranged the attack by the Nazis on the Soviet Union, it is very difficult indeed to believe that he, as a Soviet leader, is ignorant of what the facts were at that time. Therefore if you do not believe he is so ignorant, and that is hard to believe, then you must believe that he is doing this for some bad political purpose.

It is just as well in the face of this kind of remark we should recall that in 1941 when Great Britain was being charged by the Soviet leader with organizing the attack on the Soviet Russia by the Nazis, Great Britain and the nations of the Commonwealth were standing almost alone against the tyranny and terror of Nazi might. Indian troops, maybe some of whom were in Mr. Khrushchev's audiences in India, were fighting with us at that time to save Europe and the world from Nazi aggression; from Nazi military tyranny which at that time was being aided and abetted by the Soviet Union. If remarks of that kind are based on ignorance it is frightening to think that the destiny of 175 million people in Russia, and therefore our own destiny to some extent, is in the hands of such men. If it was not based on ignorance, it must be based on a calculated effort to cause trouble. It throws a lurid light indeed on the "Spirit of Geneva" about which I heard so much in Russia and which along with millions of other people in the world, we so warmly welcomed at that time.

To sum it all up, we came back to Canada feeling that so far as the Soviet Union was concerned the likelihood of a military attack was not great providing we retain enough military strength in the West - in NATO and in other places - to remove the temptation provided by the hope of easy victory. If we remain strong militarily there is not likely to be all-out aggression. But that does not mean there is not going to be conflict. We are, indeed, in a new kind of conflict. We have been in it for some time. We are just beginning to appreciate its importance and its significance: conflict, short of all-out war.

It is one thing to prepare for a military aggression. It is probably more difficult and just as important to prepare to meet political aggression. For that purpose we not only have to be politically and socially and economically strong, we have to be united in the free world. Above all we have got to be united in NATO, the annual Council meeting of which, with two colleagues in the government, I am attending at the beginning of next week. One way of being politically strong is not to be lulled into a sense of false security by blandishments; not to allow relaxation of tension, which we must welcome whenever and wherever it occurs, to lead into relaxation of effort.

Another way to be politically strong is to use all the resources of diplomacy whenever there is a real opportunity to negotiate. It is easier to negotiate, indeed, now when we are strong. Our strength is, after all, only a means to an end and that end is the peaceful solution of the problems which at present divide the world.

While one must feel a little discouraged at times, especially when we realize that the "Spirit of Geneva" of last summer is not quite the "Spirit of Geneva" of last week, we should not allow that discouragement to persuade us to withdraw into ourselves nationally or into our Western coalitions. We must continue to seek out every opportunity for negotiation of the differences which are so dangerous and so dividing. Please God that one day as a result of that search, and as a result of keeping prepared for any kind of honourable and decent settlement, we will find such a settlement; we will find a way of bringing the peoples of the world together in friendship and co-operation, in a world where totalitarian governments will not be able to keep them apart.

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