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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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believe the report that there are more teachers of English in the USSR than there are students of Russian in the USA. There is a particular interest in American culture and life styles. One of my first theatre experiences in Moscow was a brave attempt to do "Porgy and Bess"; one of the last was a version of the "Rose Tattoo" by Tennessee Williams, a picture of decadence which presumably conformed to official guidelines, despite the risk of the audience drawing the wrong lessons. This is not to say that the Russian classics are out of style, or that contemporary Soviet artists are not popular. Pushkin remains the most popular Russian writer. Tickets for any performance of the Bolshoi are a hotter commodity than tickets for the World Series.

Moreover, there is no great emotional attachment to Western culture. Russian feelings about the West have been described as follows by one of the few Western intellectuals who is at home in both cultures, Isaiah Berlin: "a combination of intellectual inadequacy and emotional superiority, a sense of the West as enviably self-restrained, clever, efficient and successful; but also as being cramped, cold, mean, calculating and fenced in, without capacity for large views or generous emotions, for feeling which must, at times, rise too high and overflow its banks, for heedless self-abandonment in response to some unique historical challenge, and consequently condemned never to know a rich flowering of life."¹

DIFFERENT VALUES

These impressions relate in part to differences of values or value systems in East and West. In a symposium conducted by the Heritage Foundation in 1984, a number of prominent Americans, most of whom hold conservative views, were asked about the nature of the conflict with the USSR. They divided about evenly between those who emphasized a struggle for the survival of democratic values and those who gave importance to a clash of geo-political interests. Many used such terms as "fundamental" or "irreconcilable", to describe the difference, thereby echoing Soviet ideologists who certainly do perceive an irreconcilable conflict of values. However, when asked about American ultimate objectives, few seemed to think that the USA should try to change the nature of the Soviet system, even if this were a feasible matter. They preferred, rather, one version or another of the policy of containment, with a minority advocating a roll-back of Soviet power from Eastern Europe, perhaps expecting that in the end the Soviet system would erode or be overthrown.

It was Tocqueville in 1835 who defined the conflict of values as one of freedom versus servitude

("the Anglo-American relies upon personal interest to accomplish his ends and gives free scope to the unguided strength and common sense of the people; the Russian centers all the authority of society in a single arm"). Tocqueville was writing well before either country had abolished slavery, so the juxtaposition of "freedom" and "servitude" was somewhat misleading. But the contrast between individual freedom and the authority of the state was and remains a central element of the conflict over values. The revolution of 1917 did not, as we often assume, imprison the Russian people in a system of values repugnant to them. It reinforced the old system. The Russian émigré writer, Alexander Zinoviev, for example, dismisses the common view in the West that the people of Russia are yearning for our version of democratic values: that is, "the idea of 'the individual' as an entity that has rights and deserves respect independently from the social context which sustains him."² However, the same might be said of many aspects of Muslim culture, or of Chinese traditions, and yet we do not usually regard these societies or countries as mortal enemies for that reason. There must be reasons for the antagonism over values that go beyond democratic principles.

One explanation lies in the Marxist vision. Isaiah Berlin, this time writing about two types of personalities, whom he called hedgehogs and foxes, said: "Those on the one side who relate everything to a single central vision... a single universal organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance (the hedgehogs) — and on the other side those who pursue many ends often unrelated and even contradictory (the foxes)..."³ Berlin was discussing Tolstoy and concluded that Tolstoy was really a fox but believed he was a hedgehog. I wonder if this insight can be applied to the contemporary leaders of the Soviet Union?

Lenin and Stalin were almost certainly hedgehogs and believed in the single vision they had learned from Marx and Engels. Soviet leaders continue to speak of "objective laws" which govern the world and which only Communists fully understand, except of course for Communist "heretics", the numbers of whom are certainly increasing. These laws suggest that "a new socialist world" is bound to replace the capitalist world, sooner or later, although not any longer, or necessarily, by war and revolution. Moreover, the Soviet aim remains, as Brezhnev put it to the 26th Party Congress in 1981, "to create a society which is not divided into classes", although the date of achievement of this goal has been left deliberately vague in the current draft of the Party programme.

I think we must accept these kinds of statements at face value. They constitute a system of beliefs. But

increasingly Soviet actions, both at home and abroad, suggest that other kinds of objective facts, beginning with nuclear weapons and extending to recognition of the need for new incentives and methods of work on the farm and at the factory, require the reactions of a fox. Henry Kissinger's memoirs reflect the resulting bewilderment of Western statesmen, confronted on the one hand with "conflicts between philosophies" rather than relations between states, and on the other with "ruthless opportunism", which Kissinger describes as the essence of Soviet strategy. In the same vein, Secretary of State George Shultz has wondered aloud whether the USSR is "just another great power", or is "inherently militarist and expansionist"; he prefers the latter interpretation because, in his view, "that's basically the way they have always described themselves and always behaved."⁴

It is a large step from the perception that Soviet values are different from ours to the conclusion that Soviet policy aims to impose these values on everyone else, and that Nicaragua, for example, must suffer the same fate as Poland. But it is a step which many take, sometimes arguing like Mr. Shultz that the USSR is "inherently" expansionist, thus confusing a doctrine about the future postulated by Marx and Engels with Soviet practice a century later.

Confusion is facilitated by the ambiguities of Soviet ideology and Soviet policy, a confusion brought home to me at the Brezhnev funeral, where the order of protocol put the leaders of major Western communist parties ahead of their respective heads of state. Yet we must be careful not to let these ambiguities revive misguided Western assumptions about a grand Soviet strategy to conquer the world, the secret of which remains locked in some recess of the Kremlin. The doctrine of "proletarian internationalism" is kept alive by ideologues on both sides but the actual policies of Soviet leaders reflect a prudence which compares not unfavourably with the record of other great powers, past and present.

A second source of the antagonism over values lies in the common assumption that the USSR has remained a "totalitarian" state in the sense which became popular in the 1950's when writers like Hannah Arendt were investigating the common features of Nazism, Fascism and Stalinism. There is truth in the view that, until recently, Western scholarship has largely failed to make the proper distinctions between Stalinist and post-Stalinist conditions in the USSR, and to come to grips with "the changing, multi-colored complexity of the Soviet experience."⁵

The claim that "communism is a new type of society" is made both by supporters and opponents of Communist régimes, but there is very little empirical research on the USSR which helps to demon-

strate its truth. On the contrary, a good case can be made that Soviet society shows both continuity with Russian history and obvious parallels with contemporary social phenomena in the West. The overwhelming Western media and political attention to "dissent" in the USSR and to the tales of life in the camps recounted by émigré writers, obscures, if it does not stifle, investigation, for example, of popular attitudes to the régime, of elite satisfactions, and of the role of competing interest groups. Public opinion in the USSR is neither monolithic nor apathetic, although it finds different forms of expression than in the West. George Kennan is right to remind his Soviet friend of the dangers of a "state of mind that assumes all forms of authority not under Soviet control to be ... wicked, hostile, and menacing"⁶ but he does not explain what is meant by "Soviet control."

It is my impression, based, it is true, on fragmentary evidence, that debate within the Party is real, that authority fluctuates, and that personality and character are important factors in decision-making. When Andreï Gromyko was Foreign minister in the late Brezhnev years, for example, there was little doubt that his views on questions of foreign policy dominated the Politburo. Today the situation may well be different. But the point is that the Soviet political system is tempered and molded by such factors as personality, interest group competition, and public attitudes, as much as by Party discipline or the powers of the police. One has only to live in other non-Western countries, the vast majority of which are non-democratic by our standards, to be aware of the similarities as well as the differences between authoritarian political systems, whether of the Right or of the Left.

Finally, must we assume that our values are necessarily better? This is a question which most of us in the West automatically answer in terms of political freedoms. If values are judged on the basis of social as well as political outcomes, we may learn something from the comparison. What do we really know, for example, about the incidence of crime in the Soviet Union, or about the upbringing of children, or about the condition of the poor? Is our kind of consumer society a better model or goal for others to imitate? Prejudice and ignorance, as well as deception and secrecy, make it difficult to give greater thought to these questions. Cultural, academic and scientific exchanges must be greatly expanded if we are to begin to answer them.

Both sides in the cold war have exaggerated the conflict over values, in part, because both the USSR and the USA wish to be regarded as lamplighters in a world of darkness. Both justify the possession of power by the vision of salvation, and thus disguise the conflict over interests, which is real, by the use of

moralistic language (of ideology, if you like), perhaps as an unconscious repudiation of the sin of "imperialism", which both associate with the bad old days of European hegemony.

DIFFERENT INTERESTS

The conflict over interests is best described, in the phrase of Marshall Shulman as "a limited adversary relationship." Writing in 1965, he described the essential character of East/West relations as the pressure of the USSR to increase its power and influence in the world, but he also argued that the elements of continuing conflict were neither "total nor absolute", and he saw the need to draw the Soviet Union into accepting "international processes that make possible adjustments without war."⁷ This in fact began to happen over the next decade, both through the SALT process and at the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe. Yet by the end of the 1970's serious scholars, such as Shulman, were questioning the very possibility of reaching stable solutions based on a balance of power. The Soviet view of the world balance as inherently dynamic and bound to evolve in favour of the forces of "national liberation", remained the same. And it coincided with events in the Middle East, Africa and Indochina which suggested to many that détente was a mirage. The invasion of Afghanistan and the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua drove home the point and appeared to establish a double standard for great power intervention in the domestic affairs of nearby states.

I would argue that the conflict of interests finds its main source in Europe, where Soviet and Western security interests clash most directly. Other Soviet neighbours, especially China, are also seen in Moscow to represent a security threat to the USSR, but with the notable exceptions of Norway and Turkey, they are not allies of the USA. None allow American troops to be based on their soil. The analogy with Cuba and Nicaragua is of some interest. The Soviet view of its commitments to Eastern Europe, sometimes called the Brezhnev doctrine, is based primarily on security concerns, although it is dressed up in ideological clothes. Distant friends, such as Cuba and Nicaragua, are in a different category, and even Afghanistan, in my view, would be allowed to revert to a non-communist political system if that in the end were the price of Soviet withdrawal.

In any event, it is surely misleading to assert, as some continue to do, that the USSR is deliberately intent on extending its control over the whole of Eurasia. The actual record of the past forty years belies this view. And how would such control be exercised, unless it is assumed that every communist

party in Europe and Asia is ready not only to take power but to obey the dictates of Moscow; or, if not, that Soviet troops and arms are in unlimited supply? The view from Moscow, on the contrary, is not of opportunities for expansion waiting to be seized, but of threats to the maintenance of such control and influence that can still be exercised. Both the Polish and Afghanistan crises were interpreted from this perspective.

Despite the new tensions of the past five years, the adversarial relationship remains limited because neither side has dared to transgress what the other perceives to be the boundaries of its own vital interests. Thus the *cordon sanitaire* remains in place in Eastern Europe, shaky as it may be. The Koreans have learned to co-exist. China has been careful not to ally itself with either adversary. An uneasy stand-off continues in the Middle East, where Soviet interests are important and imply preventing the development of a situation that could lead to Soviet military involvement. Soviet help to Cuba and Nicaragua is governed by an acute appreciation of what the USA would regard as threats to its security, and such help as it gives to friends in Africa has not led to significant change in the politics of that continent. The SALT limits continue to be respected, although we are approaching a time when both sides may perceive that vital interests are at stake because of the assumed capacity of the other to deliver a first strike. A first strike capacity, however, is an abstraction which strategists and others often manipulate to justify new weapons and new concepts of defence. No political leader would engage such a capacity unless crisis escalated out of control. But for that to happen, miscalculation, mistrust and fear would have to run deep. We come, therefore, to the question of perceptions.

DIFFERING PERCEPTIONS

The adversary relationship is based on a number of perceptions which are clearly correct. Examples of these are that the USA and the USSR are natural rivals because of their size, power and influence, independent of competing ideologies; that, in addition, each questions the political legitimacy of the other; and that, finally, modern technology has expanded this rivalry to global proportions.

The major misperception in my view is the fear that "imperialism" on the one hand, or "communism" on the other, is bound in some sense to expand at the expense of the other. Pravda editorials on the crisis in Poland in 1980-81 maintained that it was inspired and fomented by Western "imperialism" with a view to undermining the "socialist camp." A somewhat similar American view, ex-

pressed recently by former President Nixon, is that the "most difficult and potentially dangerous issue which brings the two nations into confrontation is the Soviet policy of supporting revolutionary movements against non-communist governments in the Third World."⁸ President Reagan told the General Assembly on 24 October 1985 that "all of these conflicts share a common characteristic: they are the consequence of an ideology imposed from without, dividing nations and creating regimes that are, almost from the day they take power, at war with their own people. And in each case, Marxism-Leninism's war with the people becomes war with their neighbours."

The Soviet view rests on a doctrinal base, although it has long been flexible enough to accommodate the need for "peaceful co-existence", especially in the nuclear age. The central thesis implies that the USA, as the leading "imperialist" power, is bound to act in ways which lead to conflict and war. Fortunately, the "socialist camp" is now strong enough to frustrate an attack on the Warsaw Pact countries, and to deter nuclear war. The parallel view in the West is that the USSR "exports" revolution which, once arrived at its destination, acts solely in Soviet interests and is by definition a threat to other countries, especially to allies of the US. This Western belief also justifies the need for military intervention, if necessary. Those who support this view in the case of Nicaragua often ignore the dynamics of a relationship with the US which has helped to assure the very outcome which the Administration wants to prevent: an ever closer dependence on assistance from countries that can be identified as "revolutionary."

Each side thus perceives the world in terms which leave little place for complexity and ambiguity. Marxism-Leninism in practice may bear little relationship to theory (in China, for example) but it does provide a way of interpreting world politics. Western opinion is happily free of orthodox authority. There is nevertheless a climate of opinion which can be easily aroused by those who claim to know "the truth" about Soviet intentions. The image of "the enemy" can change rapidly, especially in the age of the television clip and summit diplomacy (a fact of which Gorbachev is better aware than were his predecessors). And yet there is a symmetry to Soviet and American variations on this theme which reveals a kind of mutual paranoia that is deeply embedded and unresponsive to rational argument.

One variation is about the internal sources of power in each country. The Soviet ideologue is convinced that Wall Street rules, not Capitol Hill, and that somewhere along that legendary street a small group of greedy men pull the strings to which the puppets in Washington or at General Dynamics

dance. It is a favourite subject for cartoonists. So is the image of the Kremlin in the West — a dark fortress (which of course, it is, although full of light as well) inhabited by a few look-alike figures, whose collective legitimacy rests, not on popular consent, but on military power which can only justify its existence by threatening to bring "communism" to the world. These caricatures of reality draw their power from a mixture of truth and fiction. The memories of those who lived in the time of Stalin feed the Western imagination, just as the Soviet fantasy recalls the muck-raking American journalism of the time of the "robber-barons."

A second variation is about the respective ideals of communism and capitalism. The official Soviet view is that capitalism perverts "democracy" (a term with many meanings) for its own ends of personal enrichment, wage slavery and racial discrimination. The American South, and its literary historians like Faulkner or Mark Twain, are favourite subjects for television journalism or academic study, as are the ghettos and slums of the Northern cities. There is no dismissing the wealth of the capitalist world, but it is said to be earned on the back of the workers and at the expense of gross injustice for the rest of the world. The common Western version of the Communist reality (sometimes reserved only for the Soviet Union) is much the same — a privileged élite to whom all is available, and a populace scrambling for the meagre and shoddy products of a system that cannot work because individuals are given no incentives to make it work. There is a little truth in both these views, but it is not easy to distinguish it from the cumulative evidence of a different reality.

To what extent do these views reflect the sentiments of ordinary people in both countries? In my experience, the Russian people harbour little or no ill-will towards Americans, nor do films or the print media generally incite them to do so. Rather it is the "ruling classes" or the US Administration which are blamed for such hostility as may exist. The political temperature can of course be raised or lowered in accordance with official wishes, in contrast to the cultural environment of North America where the public mood is more likely to be influenced by the whims of television and film producers. Thus a recent poll of American opinion found that 58% of Americans believe they are more patriotic than are the Russians, and that 46% think they care more about their children, opinions which can hardly be explained except by large doses of misinformation.

In a 1984 study of "Assumptions and Perceptions in Disarmament", the Swiss scholar Daniel Frei concludes that the kinds of views I have just described rest on fundamental beliefs which reflect a genuine diversity of interests. He expects the underlying political conflict to continue to prevent agreement

on measures of disarmament. I agree that such beliefs tend to reinforce the divergence of interests, but I also believe there is evidence that common ground exists and can be gradually enlarged.

COMMON INTERESTS

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 accident or mis-communication, as recent proposals for joint control centres demonstrate.

Associated with this interest are concerns about regional conflict and world order, driven in part by the growth of terrorism. It is a common assumption that the Soviet Union encourages terrorism, perhaps because we tend to identify terrorism with the PLO and other groups which are regarded in Soviet eyes as fighting for "national liberation". There is a need to look at this issue more closely. It may well be that Soviet policy is moving towards traditional Western views of conflict control though third party settlement and mediation, especially in the Middle East, although there is unlikely to be any acceptance of the Western assumption that a long-range status quo is either possible or desirable. Indeed this assumption that the status quo among nations is something to be preserved and buttressed by international law, as understood in the West, and that a new international economic order, and perhaps political order, would be "illegal", is rejected by most of the members of the United Nations. But short of this assumption, there is reason to believe the Soviet Union will continue to advocate prudence to its friends and to be ready to co-operate quietly with its so-called enemies.

A third and 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 (and there are others, such as the joint exploitation of Siberian resources) began to be explored in the era of détente, and had significant effects on Soviet perceptions. They had less effect in the West, except for the growing popular anxiety about nuclear war. 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.

NOTES

1. Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, Penguin Books, 1979, pp. 181.
2. George Urban, "A Dissenter as a Soviet Man: A Conversation with Alexander Zinoviev II," *Encounter*, May 1984, pp. 34.
3. Isaiah Berlin, *op. cit.*, pp. 22.
4. "Secretary's Interview on 'This Week with David Brinkley' on March 17, 1985," *Department of State Bulletin*, May 1985, pp. 37.
5. Stephen F. Cohen, *Rethinking the Soviet Experience*, Oxford University Press, pp. 37.
6. George Kennan, "Reflections (Soviet-American Relations)," *The New Yorker*, September 1984, pp. 60.
7. Marshall Shulman, *Beyond the Cold War*, Yale University Press, 1965.
8. Richard Nixon, "Superpower Summitry," *Foreign Affairs*, Fall 1985, pp. 6.

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