

STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES

INFORMATION DIVISION
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No. 55/41 THE VISIT TO THE SOVIET UNION

Text of the Talk by the Secretary of State for External Affairs, Mr. L.B. Pearson, for the "Special Speakers Series" of the CBC on November 27, 1955.

Since returning from my visit to the Soviet Union, I have often been asked: why did you go there? and what were the results, if any?

I went to Russia primarily to exchange views about current international issues, particularly those of direct concern to our two countries, in the hope that such an exchange might assist in some small way in the resolution of differences; or at least give me a clearer understanding of what these differences were. Certainly no one can be happy about them when you realize that the price of failure to establish a durable peace might easily be the unimaginable devastation of a nuclear war.

In my talks with the Soviet leaders I did what I could, and whenever I had the chance, to correct misunderstandings or misapprehensions about the policies by which we in Canada, in concert with our Allies, seek to protect our security and ensure peace.

I tried to make them realize -- and I did not have the impression that this was labouring the obvious -- that we of the West are as vitally concerned as the Soviet leaders told me they were, with peace and security and the removal of the causes of war. But I likewise made it clear to them that we were not prepared to scrap our collective security arrangements or weaken our defences merely because of what has been called the "Geneva Spirit"; -- especially when as the recent Geneva conference has shown, that "spirit" as a subject for toasts is one thing; but as a basis for negotiations is something else. It is not enough to talk in general and friendly terms about "reducing international tensions", while leaving unresolved the basic differences which cause these tensions.

During my visit to Moscow and to the Crimea we talked of many things -- of "Ships and shoes and sealing wax, and cabbages" -- and NATO. Mr. Khrushchev, a very blunt and outspoken person, who does not waste time on the niceties of language or protocol, and the more subtle and sophisticated Mr. Bulganin (these two seem very close together at the "summit", of Soviet affairs) made no secret to me of their determination to weaken and destroy our North Atlantic Organization as an aggressive, anti-Soviet bloc.

I told them that NATO was no such thing; that it was formed only after the United Nations had proved ineffective to guarantee our security against the dangers that threatened us; that strong support for it would remain a firm principle of Canadian foreign and defence policy until the international situation or the United Nations made regional security pacts unnecessary.

I also did my best to convince them that the United States had no intention of attacking the U.S.S.R. or trying to use NATO for that purpose. I pointed out that if the United States were the aggressive, military, imperialist state they claimed it to be, there would be no Canada today, except as an American satellite, and that, as they should know, we were not.

The Soviet leaders also talked a lot about Germany. They stated bluntly that they would not permit that country to be unified unless she withdrew from NATO.

We should not force Germany to remain in NATO, said Khrushchev. I replied that all we asked was the right of a Germany united by free elections to decide what her future course would be.

But there would be no such elections - or no such unification - Khrushchev warned me - until a European security system of the kind proposed by his government had replaced NATO.

Well, that was the kind of frank discussion we had, and I think it was useful - and revealing.

Such a forthright talk, however, did not affect in any way the friendly welcome we received. Our hosts could not have done more for our comfort and entertainment. The warm and generous hospitality for which the Russian people have been noted - and long before the Communist revolution - seemed, and I think was, genuine. It was difficult to doubt the sincerity of the rank and file when they protested their passion for peace. But the people of all nations want peace. Their desire in this regard is only politically important when they can bring it to bear effectively on the policy of their Governments.

For Canada, specifically, those with whom I talked expressed high regard; respected our achievements in war and peace. They are not unaware, I may say, of our strategic location as their neighbours across the Pole. Mr. Khrushchev for instance, averred that if there were ever another world war, Canada would have no geographical immunity from attack. He thought that this should make us all the more anxious to be on good terms with both our neighbours.

I replied that we were well aware of our strategic position, and also of the fact that we could never feel really secure if either of our two neighbours were hostile to us - or to each other.

I made it clear, however, that in coming to Russia to explore the possibilities of understanding in issues on which we differ; or the prospects of trade and increasing contacts, we had no thought in any way of loosening our historic and friendly ties with nations with whom we have been so closely associated as proven friends over the years.

What did I gain by my visit? For one thing, a better understanding of the great gap of ignorance and misunderstanding which divides the Communist world from ourselves.

This ignorance and misunderstanding is not, of course, all on one side. But on their side it is colossal; almost pathetic, and certainly dangerous.

Western --- and especially American -- policy and purpose is judged on the basis of cabled newspapers stories which give only one side and the most lurid side of life in free countries.

It seems quite impossible to convince Soviet leaders --- who seem to base their alleged fear of us on such information -- that these stories are distorted and unrepresentative.

I told Mr. Khrushchev that we found the truth out of the clash of varying opinions -- all of which could and must be expressed. It didn't make sense to him.

Similarly when I argued (he had been talking about the threat from American bases) that a Communist party in any country was a source of fear as a Russian base, his immediate and natural reaction was that this was a purely domestic matter; that if we didn't deal effectively with what we considered to be a menace -- as they would certainly do in Russia -- then that was our affair. That a group should have the right to express views detested by the vast majority was quite beyond his comprehension -- as it would be to any communist leader.

In the face of all this, what should we do? We should stand firm against tactics of divide, weaken and destroy -- through threat or through blandishment. But equally, we should do nothing -- by provocative word or policy -- to increase that fear of the west as a threat to peace -- which they claim, genuinely or not, to feel.

We should also remember that to the Soviet rulers, peaceful co-existence means competitive co-existence -- and that in this competition, which they expect to win, they are bound only by their own rules.

That is why I was ready to believe Mr. Khrushchev and the others when they told me, as they often did, that they wanted peace, or, if you like, a peaceful interlude.

In addition to the compelling reason that the alternative of war may be universal destruction -- and these men are not suicidal Hitlers -- there is their conviction -- as Mr. Khrushchev has candidly admitted -- that in a more peaceful international climate the free peoples will lose the competition, because they will not accept the sacrifices that prolonged defence preparations involve. Their coalitions -- particularly NATO -- will therefore fall apart. Communists, I was assured, could stand up better to sacrifices than we could -- are tougher, more disciplined, and more patient in the long pull than we are. Communist society would therefore be superior to our capitalist society, in peaceful but competitive co-existence.

Certainly I am satisfied, from what I saw and heard, that there is great power in the Soviet Union -- based on total control and iron discipline. We would be making a big mistake if we interpreted recent tactical and amicable advances as dictated by weakness. Mr. Khrushchev was emphatic about this and I suspect that he is right.

But our strength can be far greater -- for peace as well as for defence -- if we wish to make it so -- because it is based on the free man.

The Communists think that this freedom of ours, by encouraging laziness and licence, will be our undoing. We know that -- rightly used -- it is our greatest source of strength.

It is up to us to make it so, and thereby we win the struggle, and it is going to be a long, and hard, and costly struggle, for a free and peaceful world.

S/C