CM-17
Conversations on a Park Bench

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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

Dear Dick:

Rather bushed after an hour of trudging the tree-lined streets of Kiev, I slumped gratefully to a bench to watch Kievites in the heart of the agricultural Ukraine scurry from queue to queue to buy strawberries, radishes, cherries, and cabbage. To my left sat three women, exhausted by the chase. To my right, a nondescript man in shabby clothes and a brimmed felt hat that reminded me of the headgear of a hobo.

Shortly the man took off his hat to reveal a balding head, bushy red eyebrows, and penetrating blue eyes. Hesitantly he asked whether I was a tourist and if I liked Kiev. I acknowledged my role, admired the trees of Kiev, and asked if he lived here. For only a few months, he replied, saying that he had come from Asian Russia. The man spoke English better than he understood my American. He was a novelist.

In response to his questions, I said I was a lawyer and helped to write laws for the American Congress. From then on the conversation was a monologue, punctuated occasionally by my signs of understanding and requests that he repeat some thought to be sure I was understanding what I was hearing and not being subjective in comprehension.

"In this country," said the man, "there is no freedom. For 40 years I have wanted to go to Moscow. The State with its internal passports will not permit it. I cannot go abroad, the State will not permit it.

"Here everything is organized. The State is everywhere - on the radio and in the press. It puts slogans in our parks. Children are told what to think. Most of them spend their youth in organized groups. The individual means nothing. We cannot buy books or magazines from abroad. We don't know what goes on. The culture you think you see in our music and in our arts is on the surface; it's for show; it doesn't run deep."

I asked myself if I might not be reading my thoughts and observations into what my companion was saying, and recalled another conversation three days earlier on the Black Sea beach at Sochi.

There, absorbing the sun and George Kennan's Russia and the West, I was disturbed by the chatter of a boy and his father who wanted to sit too close. When I surrendered to the interruption, the man introduced himself as a vacationing machinist from Kharkov. He was anxious to practice his English. After the usual pleasantries and a few words

with his son who was being taught English by the father, the machinist asked where I had bought the book and how much it cost. "Athens," I replied, "ninety-five cents." And what was the book about?

For half an hour we sat shoulder to shoulder scanning and discussing underlined passages - many of them critical of Soviet policies especially during the Stalin regime. My friend's remarks were "Yes"; "I understand"; "That's true"; "We can't buy books like that here." My main impression was that here was a man with an avid desire to know; to read political books; to learn what other peoples were doing and thinking.

The morning after the encounter in Kiev with my red-browed companion, I wandered back to the same bench hoping to find him again. No luck, so, purchasing a copy of the Moscow News, a thrice-weekly English language reprint of the "best" of the Soviet press, I sought out an empty park bench. Shortly after laying aside the Moscow News, a man of 25 or 30 years of age sat beside me and asked to read the paper. "Go ahead if you read English," I replied. He did and five minutes later handed the paper back and in halting English said: "I don't know what you think of our press, but I think it's rubbish!"

This man was a student of naval architecture, and an avid reader of English novels. In the next half hour I found myself being quizzed on the meaning of such idiomatic expressions as "according to Hoyle," "carrying coals to Newcastle" (which is paralleled by the Russian "taking wood to the forest"), "a Gilbertsian situation," and "have you kissed the Blarney stone today?" I tried to steer the conversation back to politics, but aside from condolences at the death of President Kennedy who this Russian believes was killed by a crazy man (contrary to the plot theory of most Russians), I made no headway. As we parted, my new friend remarked; "Good voyage, good riddance," which gave me a chance to comment that an American would respond by saying he was being "fresh."

My method of observation in Russia became somewhat that of a bird-watcher. When I was learning the technique, I figuratively barged into the hills and forests in my sport jacket and with dangling field glasses shouting: "Where are the birds?" They had flown. Later I learned to slip silently onto a park bench, dressed drably for the environment and wait and watch and listen. Soon the inhabitants assumed, on casual inspection, that I was just another. I could then make out their plumage, their worn shoes and shabby clothes. I saw these denizens travelled often in groups - red-kerchiefed Young Pioneers kindergarten groups; even the older inhabitants were often grouped and led purposefully on their way to exhibitions of Soviet culture, stopping from time to time to read red emblazoned slogans extolling work, comradeship, the Cosmonauts, and the Motherland. There must be a surplus of sign painters and red paint in the Soviet Union.

Now and then strange inhabitants came close. A few looked like American teen-agers; fewer were dressed flamboyantly, some with Western plumage from beatnik haircut to teased and dyed Italian hairdos.

And occasionally as I sat quietly observing the scene an inhabitant noted that I was different and he came to talk.

These conversations were isolated and it is perhaps unfair to generalize from them. Certainly they were not representative of conversations with Intourist guides, who have obviously been carefully briefed on what to say and how to answer difficult questions. Nevertheless, the observer who takes time to observe and not just to visit the monuments to Marx and Lenin, the Palaces of Culture, and the local theaters and ballets, cannot help but feel a vast uneasiness about the Soviet society.

A month in the Soviet Union was not long enough to make a Kremlinologist out of a Senate aide. But it was better than a 48 hour visit to Leningrad (which many tourists do from Helsinki), or a visit to Red Square, the Bolshoi Ballet, or probably even a few hours with Mr. Khrushchev himself.

Many short-term visitors are impressed by what they see. Those tourists who come to the U.S.S.R. suspicious of the Soviet experiment are often amazed to find that Soviet citizens are people; that they have a few private automobiles; that trains and aircraft are on time and reliable; that there are nice parks - more than in most U. S. cities - and that music and "news" blare from every loudspeaker and in every stadium. The visitor with a pinkish bias is impressed by many of the same things and, if he is visiting the Soviet Union as a guest of the State, the red carpet is impressive.

Why is it then that the longer-term residents, the diplomats of most nationalities, the newspaper reporters, and many of the students, and their families, are almost universally skeptical of the Soviet society?

The difference between the reaction of the short-term visitor and the resident foreigner is that it takes a few weeks to begin to feel the oppression of living in a closed society. Novelty tends to protect the short-term visitor from the atmosphere of the closed society. I suspect that first-term prisoners find prison a rather interesting place - for the first ten days. But then one gradually becomes conscious of the walls, the censored newspapers, the discipline, the inhibitions on freedom. The Soviet Union reminds one of the prison atmosphere which John Le Carré describes in his recent best seller: "You could not keep out the taste of prison, the smell of prison uniform, the stench of prison sanitation heavily disinfected, the noises of captive men. It was then...that the indignity of captivity became urgently insufferable, it was then that Leamas longed to walk in the friendly sunshine of a London park."

Let there be no mistake. These things exist in the Soviet Union. It is these things that make foreign residents speak of "getting out" to the West. It is these things which creep into conversations of the type I have described.

Can one imagine a citizen of a free society describing a certain newspaper as "rubbish"? Of course. But the point is that the free citizen can buy a thousand newspapers or magazines from all over the world until he finds one he doesn't think is rubbish. And if he is still not satisfied he can start the mimeograph machine himself. All the Soviet citizen can do with what he describes as rubbish is to use it to wrap fish, which many do.

I complained to several Soviet officials that neither visitors nor citizens can buy publications with political content in the Soviet Union, except those published by Communist parties or in the "Peoples Democracies." I remarked that I was getting tired of reading the Daily Worker and that I was amazed at such a skimpy fare in the U.S.S.R. because in nine months of travel in the Far East, Asia, and Africa, I had always been able to buy the Economist, Newsweek, Time, Life, the Reader's Digest, the Herald Tribune, the New York Times, and many, many other publications - albeit a week or so late. Why is this, I asked.

First reason: if one needs these publications he and Soviet citizens can get them in the libraries; second reason: foreign exchange. We can't afford it. Third reason, to quote almost verbatim two high officials: "The western press would only confuse our people. Why should they be confused by the Managing Editor of the New York Times?" I resisted asking who decides what will confuse; but the point was clear - ideas from the outside world which might raise questions about Soviet society are not welcome. The point is well summed up by a large red slogan I saw on a Moscow square: "The Soviet Press is the Ideological Force (shock troops) of Communism."

Aside from the lack of world information in the Soviet Union, another thing I found most disturbing was the character of the motivation of the individual citizen. Since everyone is guaranteed a job and since no true Soviet citizen is supposed to accept tips (they do), services generally must depend upon the individual being motivated by something other than the fear that he will lose his job or by the chance to earn a few extra rubles. I was not able to find any other motivation for service-type jobs except the Burma Shave-type exhortations that festoon many thoroughfares: "Glory to Labor," "Glory to Excellence," "Be a Good Example," "We Build Communism," "Glory to our Motherland." And this doesn't seem to be working very well. Much of the work done is just plain sloppy - whether it be in such fields as road building, hotel services, or dental care. A good many thoughtful Soviet citizens recognize this shortcoming in their society and efforts are being made to improve the quality of services by means of State exhortation and the organization of Brigades of Communist Workers dedicated to such goals as getting to work on time, staying sober, setting an example, working overtime, exceeding goals - in short, they seek to make a religion out of labor for the State.

I mention these characteristics of Soviet society to illustrate the all-pervasive influence of the State upon the life of the individual Soviet citizen. The pressure of the State is toward conformity with the ideas of those in charge of the State. The individual's life, thinking, housing, recreation, and child rearing must fit in with the ideological guidance received from the top - the dictatorship of whomsoever happens to be in charge. For 30 years that was Stalin and the people were able to do nothing about it.

I do not wish to leave this subject on too sombre a note. There are undoubtedly tens of thousands - perhaps millions - of Soviet citizens who object, as did my conversationalists, to the intellectual oppressions of the Soviet State. There are signs of growing intellectual freedom in the arts and in the sciences. Many citizens are learning to read between the lines of the propaganda machine, helped by such external news sources as the BBC, the VOA, and Soviet foreign aid engineers and technicians returning from abroad. Now and then an audacious couple will try "twisting" in a public place, frequently to the accompaniment of tape recordings taken from Western short wave broadcasts, and to the obvious consternation of their elders and party leaders. Television, telstar, and travel are opening small windows to the western world.

It would be a mistake, however, to believe that these small signs of an opening society will be able to overcome in any short period of time the blaring theme of the Soviet State: You never had it so good and we made it that way. If Peter the Great, who in the early 18th century sought to open Imperial Russia to Europe, were to return to Moscow today he might well remark: "Plus ça change, plus c'est la meme chose." Soviet society is still closed to the ideas of the West.

When one considers the role of the Soviet Union in the contemporary world it is important to contemplate that role at two levels. One is the role I have just discussed - the Soviet government's dealings with its citizens. The other is the role of the Soviet Union in its international relationships.

So far as its international relationships since October 1962 are concerned, the Soviet Union has been less of a troublemaker than heretofore and its policies toward the West have softened.

One of the main reasons for a general softening of Soviet policies toward the West is the struggle between Peking and Moscow for ascendancy in the international communist movement. Historically Russia has feared two-front military confrontations. The cold war now being waged with Peking makes it imperative, therefore, that the Kremlin try to reduce its tensions with the West. At the same time new tensions are constantly generated because the issue between Peking and Moscow is over the question of whose technique in assaulting the free world is most likely to do in the "imperialists" in the shortest

period of time with the least likelihood of destroying communism in the process. Victory in the Sino-Soviet conflict will be heavily influenced by which state can pull the "imperialists'" tail hardest in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. As a result, the Kremlin finds itself faced with the dilemma of wanting to reduce tensions with the West so it can focus its energies on its fight with Peking but at the same time finds that victory in the struggle requires the striking of postures and the posing of threats which may increase tension with the West.

In any event, the Sino-Soviet conflict has undoubtedly served, temporarily at least, to lessen tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States.

A second reason for lessening tensions with the West generally, and the United States in particular, is Soviet recognition that there are some areas of international relationships in which the United States and the Soviet Union as the world's two super-powers have interests which are now, or may in the future become, common interests. Thus, common interests dictated agreement on the suspension of certain nuclear tests, may promote agreement on preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, have led to reductions in the production of fissionable materials, and may at some future time encourage the taking of common positions on such issues as voting in the U. N. or trade with less developed countries.

A third reason why the Soviet Union finds it necessary to lessen tension with the West is because it is slowly recognizing the fact that it is dangerous and difficult for a super-power with world-wide responsibilities and obligations to act irresponsibly. A misstep or an error in judgment on the part of a non-nuclear power is less likely to bring devastating consequences for the world than a similar mistake by a nuclear power. Absolute power may not breed responsibility. However, the power of the Soviet Union is not absolute. Its power is great enough, nevertheless, to make its irresponsible use extremely dangerous to the Soviet Union itself, as was the case in Cuba in 1962.

Furthermore, the Soviet Union now has relationships with so many states which it desires to influence that its right hand must know what its left is doing. Otherwise there is risk of reputation-damaging public exposure of inconsistency. This is not to say that the Soviet Union can be expected thereby to put consistency ahead of political advantage. All I mean is that it has become more difficult for the Soviet Union to take positions based solely on their trouble-making potential for the West. The U.S.S.R. must consider the reactions of other states. Performance must begin to comport with promise.

A fourth reason for softening attitudes toward the West is that internal problems have made it necessary for the U.S.S.R. to look westward for help. Agricultural failures and a lagging chemical industry have led to requests for the purchase of these products in the West and have caused the Soviet Union to try to expand its trade generally with the West.

There are other factors of great significance, such as increasing respect for the military strength of the United States and increasing domestic demands for the appurtenances of an affluent society, which have contributed to a softening of Soviet attitudes. The point I wish to emphasize, however, is that none of these factors arisesfrom any love and affection for the West, for its way of life, its economics, or its politics. Lessening of East-West tensions attributable to changed Soviet activities are matters of strategy forced on the Soviet Union by factors which it has not been able to control. Lessening tensions do not reflect any desire on the part of the Kremlin establishment to abandon its goal for the ultimate creation of a socialist world compatible with, and perhaps subservient to, the Soviet state.

In summary, the conclusion I draw from my observations on the nature of the Soviet domestic society, particularly as it concerns the relationship of the State to the individual, is that there is hope over a long term of years that the world-wide historic trend of a growing recognition that the State exists to satisfy the needs of the individual, and not vice versa, will make its impact felt within the Soviet Union. This historic trend may be speeded up if the West utilizes every opportunity it has to increase by radio, TV, the press, and exchanges, the understanding of the Soviet people and the Soviet Government that free men and free ideas and free information - in short, the open society - will not destroy but will expand their own well-being and happiness.

The significance of the above observations on the international forces that are dictating changes of strategy to the Kremlin establishment is that over a long period of years strategy may influence the objectives of communism itself. In time the goal of creating a world in the communist image may be replaced by goals based on realization that a world of states recognizing the eminence of the individual rather than the State, holds for the international community and for all mankind the greatest hope for survival in hapiness, prosperity, and peace.

Another twenty-five years of peace might get the world over the hump.

Sincerely yours,

Carl Marcy

Carl Marcy

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