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cc p/c



Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

30 November 1988

Seen by the Prime
Minister.
CDP/dii

Dear Chunks,

Sir Rodric Braithwaite's First Impressions of Moscow

/ like

We shall be submitting briefing for Mr Gorbachev's visit shortly. The Foreign Secretary thought, however, that the Prime Minister might ~~like~~ to see now Sir Rodric Braithwaite's first impressions despatch in which he sums up the key issues and dilemmas facing Mr Gorbachev and his reforms.

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The Foreign Secretary thought that the Prime Minister might also be interested in the enclosed internal comments on the despatch.

Yours,

Stephen Wall

(J S Wall)
Private Secretary

C D Powell Esq
10 Downing Street

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RUSSIA 1988 : IMPRESSIONS OF A DEBATE

SUMMARY

An unprecedented public debate on history, and on political, economic and military change, is being pushed by Gorbachev to bolster his reforms. But his success is not assured. We are right to be cautious.

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BRITISH EMBASSY

MOSCOW

The Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey Howe QC MP
etc etc etc
Foreign and Commonwealth Office
LONDON
SWIA 2AH

21 November 1988

Sir

RUSSIA 1988 : IMPRESSIONS OF A DEBATE

"We have overthrown the past: but we have not overcome it."

(after Lenin)

1. On 15 October 1964, we heard over the BBC in Moscow that the Chinese had exploded their first atom bomb, Harold Wilson had won his first election, and Khrushchev had lost his job. Of the last we had had no warning. We had no Russian friends to feed us rumours. The Soviet press had been silent. The next day Pravda told us laconically that Khrushchev had been sacked - for unpredictability, irresponsibility and "hare-brained schemes". Then he became an unperson. And that - for two decades - was that.

2. The contrast today is staggering. This is no longer the old Russia of evasion, half-truth, and the downright lie. Soviet politicians dispute in public and survive. There is hardly a book or poem still banned. Opinion in the press ranges as widely as it does in, say, France. People speak their minds freely in private, and increasingly in public. Amongst the impressions which have crowded in upon us since our return, it is this new openness which makes the greatest impact. I believe it is unprecedented in Russian history. In the past, intellectual ferment has been suppressed by the government of the day, convinced - as all Russian governments have been - that intellectual freedom would lead direct to popular rebellion. Now it is a matter of deliberate policy. Even in the short time that I have been here, Gorbachev has neutralised those who were trying to halt the debate, and it has resumed with renewed force. Gorbachev proclaims - and may believe - that Russia can only emerge from its deep crisis if reform is driven by free public discussion. It is the message the Prime Minister delivered in Poland.

/THE BURDEN OF HISTORY

THE BURDEN OF HISTORY

3. The public debate is about political, economic and military change. But it centres on history, always a far more political business in Russia than in Britain. Stalin and the Tsars persecuted unorthodox historians. This summer the history exams were abolished in the schools because they no longer made sense. And history has treated the Russians hard. In this century alone, perhaps a hundred million people have died violently - in war and revolution, in prisons and camps, and in deliberately created famine. No Russian family has gone unscathed. Much of this suffering was inflicted on the Russians by themselves. While we enjoyed the Renaissance, they were paying tribute to the Tatars. Partly in self-defence, they evolved a half-oriental autocracy sustained by an incompetent and arrogant bureaucracy, a ruthless and omnipresent police, and a servile and ignorant church: a system in which political and intellectual dissent were punished by exile, the lunatic asylum, the knout, the gallows. Stalin exploited this tradition to create a terror greater in scale, but similar in kind, to the regime of Ivan the Terrible: the whole concealed in a miasma of propaganda and lies.

4. Now people are passionately determined to discover what happened, and why, so that they can ensure it never happens again. The liberal weeklies are full of Stalin's atrocities. Explicitly they pose questions of far-reaching significance. Were Stalin's excesses "necessary" - to defend the Revolution and to prepare the country against the German onslaught? If not, why did the Party, with its claim to wisdom, not compel a different path? Implicitly, they pose even more fundamental questions. Did Stalin's atrocities follow directly from Lenin's own ruthless political tactics? If so, what of Gorbachev's own claim that he is only following in Lenin's path? Medvedev, the new Party Secretary for ideology, has recently ruled that there is to be no criticism of Lenin. But I would not be sure that Lenin's immunity - or Gorbachev's - will last.

5. And what has happened to those - in the police and the Party - who were directly responsible for the atrocities? The press has named some now living in honourable retirement. The Stalinist generation is passing on, and it is unlikely that the survivors will be brought to justice. But the Russians, like the Germans before them, now have to grapple with the knowledge that their own countrymen have committed crimes on a scale unparalleled since barbaric times. New wounds are being opened, new enmities are being created, as people discover what their relations did to one another during collectivisation and the purges. It is a necessary catharsis. But it is intensely painful, and it is hardly surprising that many Russians would prefer to let sleeping dogs lie.

REFORM OF THE INSTITUTIONS

"Of course we could have a two-party system in Russia. But one party would be in power, and the other in prison."
(attributed to Bukharin)

6. Exposing the crimes of the past is one way of ensuring that they are not repeated. Genuine constitutional guarantees to guard against the abuse of power in future are even better. Gorbachev launched a

/far-reaching

far-reaching programme of constitutional reform in June. The liberal press has responded with a massive debate - on the division of powers, on the need for an effective Constitutional Court, on multiple candidacies at elections, on the independence of judges, on a revival of the jury system. These discussions do not break new intellectual ground. They are for the most part the commonplaces of political science. But they proceed from the assumption - familiar to those who wrote the American Constitution but revolutionary here - that power is inherently likely to be abused unless it is curbed by strong institutions under the law. This is a far step from the windy and illiberal sentiments which have dominated Russian political thought for the last two centuries.

7. The debate has Gorbachev's full support. The draft constitutional amendments put forward last month are intended to produce a genuinely elected Supreme Soviet, with real powers, to replace Lenin's rubber stamp. Lukyanov, Gorbachev's first deputy in the Supreme Soviet, and like him a Moscow-trained lawyer, is managing the reform. He says with conviction that these proposals are only the first step in a long and far-reaching programme of institutional and legal change. The press is analysing the proposals in detail. It has picked up most of the loopholes due to woolly drafting. We shall see how the criticisms have been acknowledged when the proposals become law at the end of this month.

8. And the press has begun to home in on one central flaw. A senior official, a Party member of forty years' standing, told me recently that people would fear a reversion to the horrors of the past as long as the Party held a monopoly of power. Gorbachev's idea of "Socialist pluralism" - that the Party should confine itself to "broad guidance" while everyone else gets on with ordinary business - carries no conviction. Nor does his scheme for separating, and yet combining, Party and Government office at all levels including the highest - his own. A respectable contributor to Izvestia has now argued that the proposal for an executive Presidency will be compatible with democracy only if the post is under proper, parliamentary, multiparty control.

9. This central flaw will not soon be corrected. But it need not be fatal. A kind of genuine pluralism is developing. So-called "informal groups" - left-wing marxists, devout Orthodox, nationalists, liberal democrats - increasingly pursue half-tolerated political activities independent of the Party. In Moscow, they are canvassing in the factories in preparation for Supreme Soviet elections next spring. These are tiny beginnings. The groupings are still regularly harrassed by the KGB, and they need great courage to continue. Their predecessors in the past have eventually been suppressed. But if the liberal mood continues, they could eventually provide - as they seem to be doing in Hungary - the germ of something new.

/THE TANGLED ECONOMY

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10. The niceties of historical debate and constitutional reform probably cut little ice with the hard men in the bureaucracy, the police and the army. They may have seen little wrong with what Marx called the "Asiatic mode of production" in Russia: an orderly bureaucratized economy, free of foreign entanglements, but capable of delivering a modestly rising standard of living, and above all of creating a defence industry capable of facing the Americans.

11. President Reagan's announcement of the SDI research programme probably did as much as anything to persuade these people that economic reform, at any rate, was essential; and that they should give at least conditional support to the new man who might deliver the goods. Gorbachev's original ideas were simple: more discipline and less vodka. Then ideas current in Khrushchev's day were taken down and dusted: the "socialist market", price reform, financial and managerial independence for the factory and for the farmers, more foreign competition, much less central planning. For a while, Aganbegyan and the other liberal economists were the standard bearers of perestroika. Their ideas were promulgated and debated everywhere.

12. The liberal economic reformers are now less sure of themselves. Their proposals did not adequately tackle the central problems of economic reform in Russia: how do you slim down and modernise a bureaucracy whose traditions of sycophancy, corruption, and incompetence date back to Gogol at least? How do you persuade industrial managers to be enterprising in a country which has never - before the Revolution or since - had a secure tradition of entrepreneurship? How do you encourage dynamism in a working class which has inherited the communalism of the pre-Revolutionary peasant village and reinforced it with the politics of envy?

13. These are of course political, not economic questions. But even at the technical level, the reformers' ideas were insufficiently thought through. In London last year Aganbegyan was unable to explain how the price reform could be carried out in practice. There were no workable plans for dealing with bankrupt factories, retraining and resettling workers and bureaucrats displaced by the efficiency drive, or compensating those most seriously affected by price changes. So far much of the reform has been a confused sham. Some of the most prominent reformers have recently admitted they were mistaken.

14. Gorbachev and his allies are of course still pressing ahead. The basic principles of the reform remain unchanged. But the action is passing from the academics and publicists to the practical men. They are creating a legal framework for tenant farmers, independent enterprises, service cooperatives, and foreign traders. They are working hard to set up a genuine banking system. And the public debate - in the government as well as the press - is now conducted in categories which before were ideologically unacceptable, even when they were understood: balancing the budget, cutting inflation, controlling the money supply, keeping wage and productivity increases in line.

15. This piecemeal, business-like approach is probably the only practical way forward. But it will take decades to disentangle the interlocking vicious circles which make up the Soviet economy. People wonder - mostly in private - whether the ordinary people can be persuaded to wait that long; or whether, tired of endless promises of jam tomorrow, they will descend into the streets. Popular rebellion in this country has usually started with a riot about bread.

PRESERVING THE EMPIRE

"The most important political question on which modern times have to decide, is the policy that must now be pursued, in order to maintain the security of Western Europe against the overgrown power of Russia".

(General Sir John Mitchell, 1838)

16. In the sixteenth century, the Tsars began a campaign of imperial expansion which, within three centuries, had taken Russian armies across Asia, and Westwards to Warsaw, Berlin, Paris, Budapest, Switzerland, Italy and Holland. By 1914, Tsar Nicholas ruled from Poland and Finland to the Pacific. Thirty years later, in the aftermath of victory, Stalin swept up Prussia and most of the remaining Habsburg lands. Since then the Russian Empire has had few lasting or significant successes, and a number of serious setbacks.

17. That is making people think. Defence and imperial policy are now publicly debated. Moscow intellectuals date the change from the Prime Minister's interview on Moscow TV in Spring 1987, when the Soviet people were first told authoritatively about the inflated size of their armed forces. Since then the think tanks and the liberal press - encouraged by Foreign Minister Shevardnadze (whose own house journal has been near the forefront of the discussion) - have argued that the promotion of world revolution has merely led Russia into unprofitable and risky entanglements in the Third World; and that the excessive Soviet military build-up was simply creating the circle of enemies which it was the object of Soviet policy to break. The military naturally object to civilians interfering in these vital and technical matters. But since Gorbachev imposed his will in September, the doctrines of "necessary sufficiency" in defence and the (obscure but important) principle that "class warfare" no longer dominates international affairs, have both become the commonplace of public discourse. Now the press is going further to call for less military secrecy, public control of the "military-industrial complex", and the diversion of budgetary and other resources from military to civilian purposes.

18. This new thinking is reflected in the arms control talks with the Americans. It has transformed Soviet policy in Africa and Asia. It has not yet resulted in redeployment of conventional forces in Europe or in observable cuts in military production. The military-industrial tanker cannot be quickly set on a new course. No doubt there is argument amongst the officers on the bridge. But - given the stifling reticence of the past - it is highly significant that the debate is occurring at all.

19. The debate on the internal coherence of the Empire must be much less welcome to Gorbachev. Ferment among the East Europeans may be tolerable if it does not threaten Russia's strategic interests in Poland and Germany. But it is still possible to envisage circumstances in which Gorbachev (or a more ruthless successor) would use force against an ally. Ferment among the subject peoples of the Empire is more immediately dangerous. The public debate which is cleansing political life in Russia has also unavoidably fanned local nationalism, religious and ethnic rivalries, and resentment of the Imperial race in the Baltic and the Caucasus. Gorbachev faces deadlock in both. He may hope the passions will blow themselves out. He has no plan for decolonisation, nor perhaps is one possible in this land-based empire. It is his most vulnerable point.

20. But whatever the success of Gorbachev's imperial policy, even a liberal democratic Russia (a most distant prospect) would be by far the largest military power in Europe. Its view of its legitimate interests in Europe would inevitably differ from ours. Geopolitics will ensure that Russia remains a problem for us.

PROSPECTS

"Does this mean that these transformations are irreversible?
No, it does not."

(Gorbachev, June, 1988)

21. Gorbachev has already taken the Russian people a long step towards overcoming their past. He has deliberately and explicitly set out to change their political, social and economic culture. His great debate is a massive campaign of public education.

22. Yet many Russians are gloomy about his prospects. The historical burden is immense. Continued economic failure could fan the sullen resentment of the people. Passions on the periphery of the Empire could lead - perhaps quite soon - to open defiance and the use of force. Previous reformers have found that the Russian troika runs out of control if driven too fast. The reactionaries, disciplinarians, and Party placemen might force Gorbachev to return the reins to them. Pessimistic Moscow intellectuals do not rule out bloodshed and an unholy alliance of Russian nationalism and the military.

23. Two powerful factors point the other way. The Russian people are educated and informed as never before. They may now be mature enough to cope with the great changes demanded of them. And there is Gorbachev himself: a man with the creative energy of Peter the Great but without his brutality; with an immense capacity to learn; and with the essential ability to keep one jump ahead of his political rivals. I would place an even bet on his success. But even his failure would not end the story. A successor would eventually have to take up where he left off, if Russia is to compete in the twenty first century.

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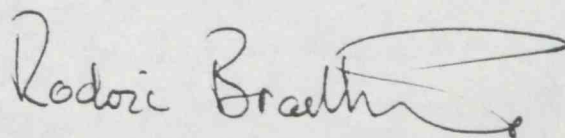
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24. For my wife and me, the return to Russia has been exhilarating and heartwarming. We naturally hope that this talented people, after mismanaging their affairs for half a millenium, will now begin to get things right. But we have few illusions. Some fundamentals have yet to change, for foreign residents as for Russians: the bureaucracy remains intractable, the secret police actively hostile. This is not a despatch about policy. But all in all I would be surprised if the professional advice which the "Company of the Merchants Adventurers to Russia" gave in 1557 to one of my earliest predecessors will be overtaken during my own stay :

"Wee doe not finde the [Russian] Ambassador nowe at the least so conformable to reason as wee had thought wee shoulde. He is verie mistrustfull, and thinketh everie man will beguile him. Therefore you had neede to take heede howe you have to doe with him or with any such, and to make your bargaines plaine, and to set them downe in writing. For they bee subtill people, and doe not alwaies speak the trueth, and think other men to be like themselves."

25. I am sending copies of this despatch to Her Majesty's Representatives in Washington, New York, Bonn, Paris, and the UK Delegation to NATO.

I am, Sir
Yours faithfully



Rodric Braithwaite