

REITH LECTURES 1957: Russia, the Atom and the West

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Lecture 2: The Soviet Mind and World Realities

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Last Sunday I talked about internal developments in the Soviet Union. Tonight it is the external attitudes of the Soviet leaders that I would like to speak about, and particularly the psychological background of their reactions in foreign affairs.

We are all familiar with the posture of irreconcilable hostility, ostensibly only toward the Western Governments but in effect toward the Western peoples as well, which has at all times animated the Soviet leaders. We have learned to expect at their hands an unremitting effort to undermine our world position, to disrupt our relations with those who have formerly been our friends, to destroy our confidence in ourselves and the confidence of others in us, to reduce us, in short, to a state of isolation, helplessness, and impotence in the affairs of the world. What is it that could bring men to take so intolerant and unpromising an attitude, one so out of accord with the obvious needs of our time, one so sure to produce tensions and dangers, inconveniences for themselves as well as for everybody else? I think one must clarify one's answer to this question before one can think usefully about the Western response.

The rationale for this posture on the part of the Soviet Government has, as we all know, been invariably expressed in ideological terms—in the characteristic jargon, that is, of Marxist-Leninist thought. There has been a common tendency here in the West in recent years to dismiss this ideological posture as mere window-dressing, to ignore its political content and implications, and to see behind it nothing more than a primitive lust for military conquest—usually envisaged as a determination to overrun Western Europe, in particular, by force of arms, as soon as military conditions might be favourable.

I, personally, feel that this is a dangerously inaccurate view of what we are up against. I believe many others who have known Russian Communism at first hand would feel the same. The hostility has been there, certainly; and it has been a deadly hostility, aimed at a destruction of all that we most intimately cherish—a destruction no less sweeping and no less final than that which would be occasioned by an outright war. But the threat has not been one of all-out military attack. It has been a combined political and military threat, but more political than military—a threat intimately associated with the weaknesses of our Western civilisation itself—looking to these weaknesses, in fact, rather than to the strength of Soviet arms, to constitute the main instruments of our undoing. The Soviet design has consisted, in other words, primarily of the determination to exploit every element of disunity, of confusion, of short-sightedness in our society, with a view to causing us to eliminate ourselves as rivals to Soviet power and influence everywhere.

In connection with this design, armed force has, to be sure, been cultivated on a major scale by the Soviet Government. It has been cultivated partly as a precaution, partly as

a psychological weapon, partly because it was always envisaged that the Soviet armed forces might some day be called upon to play a subsidiary role in the final phases of the demise of western capitalism. But it has never—at least not until very recently—been looked to as the major instrument by which our undoing was to be accomplished.

Dealing with the Soviet Threat

One of the most serious evils of this over-militarisation of thinking in the West on the nature of the Soviet threat has been that it has confused people badly about the question of what could be done to meet this threat. Assuming that the ideological foundation for Soviet policy was simply disingenuous, many people have tended to suppose either that the Soviet leaders were genuinely suspicious of Western purposes, and that this was the real cause of their hostility; or that they were simply evil men, who wanted power for its own sake and believed that they could outpace us in the military competition to a point where we could safely be attacked and disposed of. Taking one or the other of these views, people assumed that if only we could prove ourselves strong enough to discourage military aggression, or, correspondingly, if we could lay to rest the Soviet suspicions about our motives, this whole situation could be suddenly cleared up, an entirely new outlook could suddenly be induced in the Soviet mind, and the cold war would be terminated at a stroke. As the culmination of this happy process, people usually envisaged some sort of a summit meeting, at which the last misunderstandings would be removed and agreements would be arrived at for a peaceful collaboration in the future. In this manner, as you see, an oversimplified and over-militarised view of the cold war contrived to settle down comfortably, in many minds, beside a highly utopian concept of the ways in which the cold war could be brought to an end.

These tendencies naturally received a certain fillip in recent years from the death of Stalin. His successors appeared to be men of greater moderation and goodwill and humanity; and in some respects they really were, and are. Stalin, of course, also talked peace in his day, as Mr. Khrushchev does now; but he accompanied that talk with policies so harsh, so forbidding, so obviously imbued with a total enmity towards the Western world that even the most sanguine of us here in the West found it hard, in the end, to believe in the possibility of any amicable settlement. Stalin's successors, and especially Mr. Khrushchev, have talked peace with a greater show of warmth and earnestness; and they even accompanied this talk, initially, with just enough in the way of normalisation of the atmosphere of Soviet diplomacy to lead many people to hope that perhaps things had really changed.

The Post-Stalin Regime

We have now had four years in which to study the political personality of this post-Stalin regime; and I fear that the time has come when we can no longer comfort ourselves with any of these illusions. Recent events, in particular, have left us no choice but to have a searching look at some of the peculiarities of the Russian Communist mind with which we find ourselves confronted and to draw unsparingly the consequences of what we see.

From the time of their seizure of power, forty years ago, the Russian Communists have always been characterised by their extraordinary ability to cultivate falsehood as a deliberate weapon of policy. They began by adopting an attitude of complete cynicism about objective truth, denying its value if not its existence, declaring the lie to be no less useful and respectable than the truth if only it served the purposes of the Party. Departing from this premise, they have systematically employed falsehood not just as a means of deceiving others and exploiting their credulity but also as a means of comforting and reassuring themselves. It has seemed to them at all times easier, and in no way improper, to operate a militant political movement on the basis of convenient falsehood than on the basis of awkward truth. I think we have to recognise today, particularly on the example of Mr. Khrushchev's recent statements and policies, that the effects of this systematic abuse of the human intellect are deep-seated and troublesome. Forty years of intellectual opportunism seem to have wrought a strange corruption of the Communist mind, rendering it incapable of distinguishing sharply between fact and fiction in a single segment of its experience, namely in its relationship to any external competitive power. Let me stress that it is only in this one sector that the Communist mind is thus affected. In other respects, it is extremely shrewd and discerning.

I have been asked hundreds of times in recent years how it could be that men of such great native intelligence as the Soviet leaders, commanding so elaborate and costly a network of intelligence-gathering agencies, could be anything else but excellently informed about ourselves and everything having to do with us. I should like to suggest an answer to this question. In everything that can be statistically expressed—expressed, that is, in such a way as not to imply any judgement on our motivation—I believe the Soviet Government to be excellently informed about us. I am sure that their information on the development of our economies, the state of our military preparations, our scientific progress, etc., is absolutely first rate. But when it comes to the analysis of our motives, to the things that make our life tick as it does, I think this whole great system of intelligence-gathering breaks down seriously. It breaks down because over all these forty years the Communist Party has made it impossible for the people who collect the factual information to accompany that information with any really objective analysis of the nature of western society. Some of the fictions dearest and most basic to Russian Communism's view of itself would be jeopardised at every turn by that sort of analysis. The Soviet diplomatic representative or journalist abroad has no choice but to cast his analytic reports in the terms of the Marxist-Leninist ideology, whether this is applicable or not in the given instance. In this way, the Soviet leaders find themselves committed to a badly distorted image of the outside world.

An Incomprehensible Image

Being thus committed, they are able to apprehend everything about us but the main things. They view us as one might view the inhabitants of another planet through a very powerful telescope. Everything is visible; one sees in the greatest detail the strange beings of that other world going about their daily business; one can even discern the nature of their undertakings; but what one does not see and cannot see is the motivation that drives them on their various pursuits. This remains concealed; and thus the entire image, clear and intelligible in detail, becomes incomprehensible in its totality.

The fact is that the Soviet leaders are the first and leading victims of the abuse they have practised for so long on the freedom of the mind. I would not wish to maintain that they believe everything they say; I am sure they do not. But I would submit that their habitual carelessness about the truth has tended to obliterate in their minds the distinction between what they do believe and what they merely find it useful to say. It would be easier for us if they either believed things entirely or spoke them in utter cynicism. In either case, we would know where we stood. As it is, our problem is very difficult indeed ; for we can never know, when we encounter their statements and reactions, whether we have to do with the substructure of sincerely held error which does indeed exist in their minds or with the superstructure of contrived and deliberately cultivated untruth to which they are so committed.

This, it seems to me, is what we are up against in the mentality of Mr. Khrushchev and his associates; and the implications for Western statesmanship are numerous and far-reaching. Let me mention only those that seem to me of greatest importance. We must accept, first of all, the fact that there is nothing anyone can do in any short space of time to alter this situation, to correct this corruption of thought, to make out of the Soviet leaders men capable of seeing world realities as we do. It is no good trying to argue them round to our point of view. They are men who can be directly influenced by situations, but not by words expressed in any terminology other than their own. There is nothing that can be said to Mr. Khrushchev on any one occasion by any Western figures, however illustrious, that would suddenly dispel this obscurity of vision. What we are confronted with here is not just misunderstanding, not just honest error, but a habit of mind, an induced state, a condition. Even assuming for the sake of argument that it were possible to explain away in some satisfactory manner all the sources of misunderstanding and suspicion that prevail today between the Kremlin and ourselves, and to start all over again with a fresh slate tomorrow morning, I would still hazard the guess that twenty-four hours would not elapse before that fresh slate would be fouled with new misunderstandings, precisely as a consequence of the congenital inability of our Soviet friends to see themselves and us and our mutual relationship with any proper degree of realism.

No Intimacy of Understanding

In the face of this situation, I wonder about the wisdom of engaging the persons of the senior Western statesmen directly in the process of negotiation with the Soviet Government. With people whose state of mind is what I have just described no intimacy of understanding is really possible. There is only one sort of thing that can usefully be said to them and that is: what we would be prepared to do, or would not be prepared to do, in specific contingencies. This sort of thing they understand; but to say it, you do not need the physical presence of a president or prime minister; and there are even reasons why it is better not to have it. I would not wish to say that there is never a time for summit meetings. There is a time for almost everything in the strange world of diplomacy. But, surely, if the usefulness of these senior figures is to be protected and the raising of false hopes avoided, such meetings should occur, if at all, at the end of the negotiating process and for the purpose of formalising agreements already arrived at rather than at the beginning and as a means of starting the wearisome process of accommodation. However one strives to disclaim the intention,

meetings at the summit will never fail to suggest to the public mind the possibility of early global solutions—sweeping and spectacular solutions—to outstanding problems.

It is precisely this possibility of such solutions that is ruled out by what we know of the condition of mind of the Soviet leaders. The road to a safer and more hopeful state of world affairs is not to be traversed in any ‘giant strides’. On the contrary, if the tension between Russia and the Western world is to be reduced, it must be broken down into its individual components—into a number of specific problems, that is; and each of these must be treated empirically and on its merits with a view to arriving at those compromises and accommodations that would be the least unsettling to world peace. For this, it is not the hectic encounters of senior statesmen under the spotlight of publicity which we need; it is the patient, quiet, orderly use of the regular channels of private communication between governments, as they have grown up and proved their worth over the course of the centuries.

The Usefulness of Nato

This implies, it seems to me, that we must discard our recent fear of bilateral communication and our attachment to the idea of negotiating with Russia only as a coalition. There has recently been a good deal of talk about strengthening the decision-taking process in Nato. Certainly we need the maximum real political intimacy within Nato. But we will be creating difficulties for ourselves if we over-formalise in any way the processes for discussion and agreement among us. Aside from the fact that we do have real differences within the Nato family in fields aside from Russian policy—deep unavoidable differences, not to be bridged by creation of any new machinery—I fear for the effect on our relation to Russia if we make the procedures of Nato any more elaborate and restricting than they are now. The delicate explorations and discussions which must precede accommodation in complex international questions cannot be conducted by a coalition, operating on the basis of sporadic, unanimous and highly formalised decisions. For this, you need the privacy, the authority and the day-to-day flexibility which only the sovereign government can provide. I would hazard the prediction that no solution to any serious problem of Soviet-Western relations is going to be discovered in meetings where a group of Western representatives, bound by prior understandings among themselves and limited by each other’s inhibitions, confront the Soviet negotiators over a large green table, while the representatives of the world press wait in the next room to be briefed at once on all that has been said. We have need to loosen up these rigidities of communication, to divest ourselves of the fear of all that is informal and exploratory, and to restore the element of privacy to the composition of differences.

In this same connection, I find myself worried at the frequent sight of the United Nations being involved in the issues of our conflict with Soviet power, and particularly the U.N. Assembly. Some of the most important elements in the East-West conflict long pre-dated the foundation of the United Nations; they were part of the world into which it was born. It is not fair to the Organisation today to ask it to resolve the predicaments of the past as well as of the present. No international organisation can be stronger than the structure of relationships among the Great Powers that underlies it; and to look to such an organisation to resolve deep-seated conflicts of interest among those Great Powers is to ignore its limitations and to jeopardise its usefulness in other fields.

When I said that the Soviet leaders can be influenced by situations, I had in mind real situations, not parliamentary ones. The Soviet Government is not insensitive to deeper trends of world opinion, but it cannot easily be shamed into doing things or not doing them by the votes of international majorities. Soviet power, always addressing itself to peoples over the heads of their rulers, grew great on the defiance of the opinions of other governments; and it is not afraid today of votes in its disfavour. Not only will international majorities not be effective in modifying Soviet behaviour but they may easily, as things now stand, be turned at any time against us in the West; and we, with our more legalistic tradition and our great moral commitment to the principle of international organisation, will find it harder to defy them than do the Soviets.

General Disarmament?

Many people, again, would like to by-pass the political issues entirely by agreements for general disarmament; and the effort to work something out along this line has recently preoccupied the attention of our governments and of the world public. I have great sympathy for the motives of those who have worked so hard to bring this dream to fruition; but I cannot agree that the approach is a very promising one. It is true that armaments can and do constitute a source of tension in themselves. But they are not self-engendering. No one maintains them just for the love of it. They are conditioned at bottom by political differences and rivalries. To attempt to remove the armaments before removing these substantive conflicts of interest is to put the cart before the horse. At every turn we are confronted with the fact that there is no way of evading those specific political problems—for the main part territorial questions—questions of who is to rule whom, and where, and when—in which all this tension and trouble has its real origins. Only when these are alleviated will the prospects for disarmament become real; and only then will all this painstaking preparatory work yield its dividends.

Let me return to the systematic Soviet distortion of the realities of our world and of the purposes to which we are dedicated. I think we cannot just ignore this sort of thing. It is a serious error to dismiss Soviet falsehoods as 'just propaganda' and to profess to find them too absurd and unimportant to answer. I am always startled at this phrase: 'just propaganda'. Why 'just'? What is the matter with propaganda? Is it not a serious and important force in world affairs? Let us not forget that these fantastic allegations are partially believed by those who say them, and they will be at least partially believed by many of those who listen. A wise Western policy will insist that no single falsehood or distortion from the Soviet side should ever go unanswered. This will be tiresome. We do not like repetition. But we cannot afford to dispense with it. Truth does not win over error just on its merits. It, too, has to be assiduously propagated. I have asserted that there is nothing that could be said to the Soviet leaders in the space of a few days that would change their strangely corrupted mentality. But there are things which could be said to them every day over the course of several years, which would exert a useful discipline upon them, would make it harder for them to ignore the distinction between what is real and what is unreal, and would place limitations—thus far not visible—on their use of falsehood as a weapon of political policy.

It is, I fear, a comfortless message I bring you. One by one I have felt obliged to call into question all those devices to which the minds of people here in the West have

most hopefully turned in these recent years: summit meetings, global solutions, coalition diplomacy, the United Nations, disarmament. In their place I have suggested only the unglamorous devices of an informational war of indefinite duration, and a quiet old-fashioned diplomatic attack on certain of the individual political problems that divide us from the Soviet world. Having said this, I shall certainly be asked to explain what I consider these problems to be, and what I mean when I say we should apply ourselves to their solution. In my next talk, therefore, I shall venture to discuss that particular political issue which seems to me to be of greatest urgency and importance and the discussion of which encounters the deepest inhibitions on our part. This is the problem of the future of central and Eastern Europe.

There is just one more thing I should like to mention. What I have had to say about the Soviet relationship to the Western world has been based on the general pattern of Soviet behaviour over the past few years. In recent weeks we have seen some things that do not entirely fit into this pattern. In particular, the irresponsible, deliberate aggravation of Turkish-Syrian differences by people in Moscow strikes me as the most disturbing manifestation of Soviet behaviour since the Berlin blockade. I do not think this changes the validity of what I have said to you earlier on. I still see no reason to suppose that Moscow 'ants a general war. The main object of this extraordinary manoeuvre seems only to have been to drive a wedge, if possible, between Turkey and the United States, on the one hand, and the remainder of the Nato community, on the other. Possibly elation over the launching of the satellites has caused a momentary dizziness in Moscow; possibly domestic-political complications have also had something to do with it.

The fact remains that the Kremlin has recently shown itself more inclined to play close to the edge of serious international complications than at any time in recent years. To my mind, this only heightens the urgency of a careful re-examination of Western positions in our differences with Moscow. At such a time it is more important than ever that our posture should contain nothing that is unsound or superfluous and should omit nothing which bears any hopeful and constructive implications for the future.