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PRIME MINISTER

VISIT TO RUSSIA

I visited the Soviet Union, for the first time, in October. My objectives were to conclude an agreement on school and teacher exchanges; to make an assessment of Soviet science; and generally to contribute to establishing civilised relations. One does not, of course, become an expert after spending eight days there. But I brought back one or two impressions which you might find interesting.

Education

I signed an agreement with my opposite number, Gennady Yagodin, for an exchange of up to a thousand schoolchildren each way by 1990. This is an important step forward. There are plenty of British schools waiting to go; the difficulty hitherto has always been persuading the Russian authorities to receive our children, or to let theirs come. Under the agreement the Russian children will stay at the homes of British children; in Russia the British children will generally have to be in hostels but will be able to visit Russian homes. When this scheme has been up and running for a few years (and other countries are doing the same) it is difficult to imagine that the Cold War era of deep mutual suspicion could return.

Soviet education is, of course, highly selective - and elitist. The very brightest children are creamed off in a quite determined way. In Siberia, for example, we visited a school that concentrates on maths and physics. The 600 pupils had been selected from the entire Siberian and Pacific area. Most of the children at the special school I visited in Moscow were from privileged families. The one rural

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school we saw - also in Siberia - was not selective but still a bit of a show place: even so there was a good deal of Marxist and military propoganda in the text books and on the walls.

English teaching in the special schools is good. By 16 the best pupils can speak English idiomatically and they study English literature in a deeper way than their contemporaries of the same age in the UK. I met one 16 year old Russian girl in Leningrad who had read "Great Expectations", "David Copperfield", "The Old Curiosity Shop" and "Oliver Twist". You would be hard pushed to find many 16 year olds in Britain who had read even one of these. On my return, I sent the 16 year old copies of "Little Dorrit" and "Dombey and Son".

Science

I saw something of Soviet science in the universities and in the research institutes of the Soviet Academy of Science. I visited Akademgoradok, the science centre outside Novosibirsk in the middle of Siberia. I was accompanied by Sir David Phillips.

The pattern was much the same as with other parts of the Russian system. Where they concentrate they do quite well, particularly in theoretical subjects like maths and physics. But they only manage this through a brutal concentration of resources, and they lack the capacity - and the market mechanisms - to follow it through. We witnessed this quite vividly in Novosibirsk where we visited the catalysis unit. Sir David told me the equipment was the same as the best in London. This was confirmed by a young Welsh research worker in the Unit. But she also said there was no pressure in the system to get out results and to push ahead. By contrast, in the computer centre at the University the equipment was not at all up to date. The Russians said they made up for this with very good software - but there is only a certain amount you can do that way. One of the teachers at the Centre said with envy that the defence areas had all the latest equipment and that they were "an oasis of abundance".

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Informed Russians are clearly concerned, and embarrassed, about what they are doing to their environment. I was pressed in Moscow University and by the Russian Academy of Sciences to enter into joint research projects on ecology. Clearly the effects of Chernobyl have hit hard. They have an appalling record on pollution. They acknowledged that the great freshwater lake in the south east of Siberia, Baikal, is almost dead as a result of industrial effluent.

There is room for some cooperation here but we have to keep an eye on our own self interest. We have a lot more to give them than they have, at present, to offer us.

Gorbachev's Reforms

There is undoubtedly a much greater openness in Russia. The Ministers I spoke to were quite prepared to discuss problems like alcohol and drug abuse which in the past they would have simply dismissed as not occurring; and, perhaps more significantly, to acknowledge the ideological drag of Marxism on their economic development.

Everywhere the words "glasnost" and "perestroika" are seen. They have become themselves almost separate ideologies in the Soviet system. But in practice there is much more of the former than there is of the latter. Gorbachev has raised expectations beyond the capacity of the Soviet economy to deliver material results.

So freedom of thought is developing rapidly, perhaps almost uncontrollably. In history, for instance, the Russians are going through a great process of reassessing the twenties and thirties. Exams have been stopped. Up until now no Russian examination questions have had the phrases "compare and contrast" or "discuss" in them. There has always been one correct answer. Yagodin told me that he hoped to get out revised history books later this year. Day by day there are huge articles in the Russian press on reassessments of Stalin, Krushchev, and Brezhnev.

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Intellectual Openness

The same is true in literature. I visited the Writers' Union in Moscow, which is housed in a splendid 18th century building which features in "War and Peace". Previously a compliant partner in censorship, it is now where free thinking poets and writers meet - a cross between the Saville Club and the Garrick Club. Some of the poets whom Stalin sent to labour camps, like Mandelstam, are now being read; but there is still some control over the circulation of potentially subversive material like the review Novy Mir, which has serialised Pasternak's "Dr Zhivago". There is talk of publishing Solzhenitzin's first book, "A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch" about the labour camps in Siberia. I think it will take some time before "The Gulag Archipelago" is published.

Soviet intellectuals seem to know that there are limits to their new found freedom. At a lunch with the writers one of them summed it up rather well, I thought, when he said that "we know we are watching a great game being played on the field in front of us by important people. We are cheering from the sidelines; but we know we mustn't invade the pitch".

One of the other aspects of openness was that I was accompanied by 10 education journalists from the UK. At first this flummoxed the Russian authorities. But the 10 followed us to nearly all our meetings and the Russians came to accept them. Eventually the junior Minister who accompanied me spoke very frankly with them and gave his own press conferences. It was a valuable education for the Russians to see how a free press operates.

Perestroika in Education

Perestroika seems more symbolic than real at present, both in education and in the economy as a whole. Yagodin, like us, is trying to push responsibility down the line to the schools. He has a much greater task than in the UK because absolutely everything is controlled by the Department of

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Education in Moscow. The junior Minister who accompanied me was able to show some authority; but I felt that some of the arrangements will still get bogged down in the endless bureaucracy of Russia. Bureaucracy provides a great deal of local power and a large number of local jobs; giving responsibility to the schools is going to be difficult.

Economic Reform

Gorbachev faces an even bigger problem in reforming the Soviet economic system. The central problem is the complete absence of market signals to restrict demand or to encourage supply. Prices are haywire throughout the system. Yagodin told me that the acid test of perestroika in 1989 would be the reform of prices. But moving away from a centrally controlled economy, characterised by economic planning of an increasingly incompetent sort, will have enormous political costs as prices rise.

Gorbachev is, shrewdly, concentrating first on agriculture where he made his own name and career. He is pushing very hard at the concept of leaseholds for the peasants. But it is an uphill task: after all serfdom was only abolished in Russia by Alexander II in 1861 and was effectively re-established by collective farming in 1929.

Russians know that the West has a higher standard of living than they do. Gorbachev's desire for the economic advantages of Western economies is in a similar tradition to Peter the Great, trying to open up Russia to the West. The planned Socialist economy is already breaking down at the edges. There are the beginnings of small private businesses in the shape of the so called cooperative enterprises. For example there is a cooperative of people who will mend your television set in the same day; of babysitters; and a cooperative of taxidivers. I was taken by the Ambassador to a cooperative restaurant which was a bistro in a Moscow cellar. It was very much like a Western restaurant. But their place is not yet accepted: there is resentment at the prices they charge.

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"We Europeans"

I was struck by the number of times that senior Russian officials used the phrase "We Europeans". Again this takes one back to the attitude of Peter the Great. There is a strain in Russian history of looking upon themselves as the outpost against the invasion of the barbarian hordes from the east. Time and time again they were talking of themselves as Europeans, wanting to be close to Europe. I assume this is very much the line which Gorbachev is taking with Kohl, and Mitterand.

The Church

We visited a Church in Leningrad on a week day. There is no doubt that the Church is expanding. Indeed, in the Church we visited they were queuing up for baptisms of young children. There were 50 that day: as the Ambassador said, Russians really appreciate something if they have to queue first. Official records no longer have to be made. The priests look like Rasputin and there were lots of old ladies present but also lots of young people too, and young children. The Church we visited on a Sunday was full to capacity and many of the worshippers were young people.

Refuseniks

I was asked to meet some refuseniks. We had them come round to breakfast at the Embassy. They were quite open about this and wanted publicity. All were highly intelligent members of the Jewish scientific community. Personally I think it is absolutely mad for the Soviet authorities to condone a system in which these intellectual sinews of society want desperately to leave. But the evidence of discrimination against dissidents and Jews is strong.

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I made representations to the Chairman of the Academy of Sciences, Marchuk, who runs a sort of policing operation as to whether they should leave because of their scientific knowledge. That was received without resentment and I am glad to say that two of their leaders have subsequently received visas to go.

I am copying this minute to Geoffrey Howe.

K.S.

KB

29 NOVEMBER 1988

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE

P.S.

*I was very impressed with our Ambassador
Rodric Braithwaite - he is outstanding.*