

LETTER FROM ROBERT CONQUEST, 7 MAY 1990

Pa (2)  
Prime Minister

A letter from  
Robert Conquest.

CBR

"Dear Prime Minister,

It was splendid to see you, as ever, on my way to Moscow. I'm enclosing a note in part based on this latest visit there.

Personally, it was fine: - it's a bit odd for me to be lionised on Soviet TV, in Izvestia's offices (and pages) and soon. Politically the pressures are growing intense. If I'm still fairly optimistic, its in great part because of you - telling them just what they need to be told, and keeping the Europeans in line as far as possible.

I look forward to everything going your way on all the other issues too. I'm sure they will.

With warmest wishes, as always,

Robert"

c: Conquest (MJ)

SOVIET CRISIS: MAY 1990

There are only two issues of real immediacy in the Soviet Union: the Baltic States and the impending struggle over economic <sup>reform</sup>.

Of course, there are many other problems before the Soviet leadership, but not of comparable urgency. For example the political and military leadership which permitted, or rather encouraged, the revolution in Eastern Europe, is not under urgent compulsion towards any unconditional stand on arms or on the German issue in the immediate future. There will be bargaining and we must bargain firmly: but the dangers are containable.

It seems equally the case that, for all the difficulties it presents the Soviet high command, the generals have by and large accepted the necessity of a modernised and defensive posture - though this too of course depends on our vigilance.

II

The Baltic States, on the other hand, seem immediately critical.

First, this is an issue on which a Soviet consensus does not yet seem to have been reached; and perhaps even Gorbachev himself is not certain of his next move. It thus appears as a focus of political struggle within the leadership, and though minor in appearance yet possibly crucial over the whole of political life.

Second, it is a major test case for the whole progress of the USSR to better institutions. (So far Moscow has only provided talk on this general theme, and not much of that.)

The crushing of Lithuania would both appear to be, and actually be, a victory for the backward, chauvinist, short-sighted forces in the USSR, including some of the military. It is in our interest to defeat them. That is, as ever in the successful conduct of relations of this sort, to offer the strongest possible counter incentives (not necessarily, or only, in public). The Soviet economy leaves them particularly vulnerable to such sanctions: but firm commitment on them now is better

than belatedly and untidily having to put them into effect.

Unfortunately some in the west have not quite measured up. On the Franco-German view Lithuania is seen merely as a small country which is giving trouble amidst far more important high diplomacy. There is a grander Europe for which the Baltic States must sacrifice their supposedly 'petty' or 'selfish' aims. On the contrary, any European solution which does not include the rights of these people is not a solution at all, but a scramble for big-power advantages - a Franco-German and Soviet diktat.

The Americans are better, but still not quite adequate: US polls show the public willing to sacrifice the Baltics rather than even postpone the next Bush-Gorbachev summit. And the tendency even in official circles is to make the Lithuanians the main scapegoat and blame everything on the superficial point of their admittedly unskilled diplomacy. If Moscow reads this as a mood possibly dominant in the West, it must be an encouragement to repression, carrying with it repression in Russia proper and the defeat of Gorbachev. The more we want to help him, the firmer we should be.

Westerns calls for the Baltic peoples to negotiate are reasonable. But, whatever the phraselogy, they can surely only be urged on the basis that the annexation of 1940 was invalid, (as the West has maintained over the whole interim). The documents have now been published in the Soviet Union too, and the case is absolutely clear. There is some cause for optimism, with Gorbachev successfully fudging the issues: and even many Russian nationalists are prone to treat the Baltic States as exceptions entitled to secession. But the political impasse meanwhile continues, and Lithuanian and Russian liberties remain closely linked, as Czechoslovak and Russian liberties were in 1968.

### III

The other and greater crisis is of course that of the economy. We must await July. But it looks increasingly unlikely that Moscow's plans and actions will be either effective in themselves

or acceptable to the population - in particular the necessary price increases.

A common expectation now spoken of freely in Moscow and one you have certainly been told of, is a "South American dictatorship". Stalinism proper is impossible, first because there is no enthusiasm for blood sacrifices to an impossible utopian future, and second because everyone knows the Stalinist economic system brought disaster.

A 'South American dictatorship' would offer Food, Clothes, Security. It could not, of course, deliver on these promises, but by that time it would have restored the machinery of repression at a Pinochet-type level.

This possibility has been dismissed, mainly because of its predominantly military connotations. But when Muscovites use the term they do not envisage a Pinochet or Peron simply seizing power, but rather some sort of 'order restoring' action in the name of political partly legitimacy - a sort of Soviet Kadar regime; or perhaps the installation of such with hardly any military intervention at all.

In fact there is no strong reason to believe that "the Army" constitutes a united political entity ready to lend instant active support to a political-military cheque of the sort envisaged. (It is indeed being pointed out that a coup d'etat doesn't need generals at all, but can be effected by colonels, as in Greece).

No such regime could be viable in the long run, if only for economic reasons. We may also doubt if it could succeed in its first task, that of establishing itself in power - and, of course, a civil war scenario has been put forward in Moscow for a year or two now.


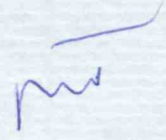
These ideas are worth recording, as illustrating that the situation is now so critical that we can hardly exclude any possibility.

A major difficulty remains the lack of political and civic sense, even though this has somewhat improved in the past few years. The liberals almost all attack Gorbachev, but offer no credible alternative. The democratic programme does not even include independent courts. It is hard to get them to agree that a parliamentary system needs parties which disagree, not a regime of perfect rightness. Still, there are men of goodwill and men of some experience, and Gorbachev may yet cobble together a viable regime, even if with an authoritarian tinge.

Either way, we need to be prepared for almost anything, and ready to react quickly.

It is little use to estimate probabilities, since it is so often the improbable that actually comes to pass in history. But I cannot forbear to register what seems a plausible scenario. A reactionary coup against Gorbachev is thwarted. This both enables him to take the emergency powers needed to put through the economic reforms, and at the same time rallies the Yeltsins and other potential victims of such a coup to his side in a more broadly based government.

Whether in those or other circumstances, he is going to need all his skills, and this year will surely be decisive.



c: Conquest (MJ)

ROBERT CONQUEST

45 Shawfield Street,  
London, SW3 4BA  
Tel. 01-352 2334

7 May 90

CA 975

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Robert

7 May 90

45 Shawfield Street,  
London, SW3 4BA  
Tel. 01-352 2334

ac from  
Floer hut tub  
Stanford  
CA 94305

Dear Charles,

I enclose a letter, &  
a note, to the Prime Minister. Great to  
be able to write in the aftermath  
of the electoral recovery.

V. interesting in Russia -  
the unpopularity of the economic reforms  
is the real hurdle, and it will need  
all possible political skills to get through  
the next few months.

Personally, I was exceedingly  
well treated - on TV several times,  
~~the~~ interviews in various papers - two in  
Izvestia: (as used in such terms as "R. Cyriel",  
a name long known the world over, but until recently  
only by repute in this country" etc)

I shall be going to a

Secret Foreign Ministry Conference  
on the origins of the Cold War in late  
June, (to be over in England for much of  
July). By that time things will  
be building up, & I hope for  
a chance to discuss

with best wishes  
as ever

Bob

[Robert Coquereau]

P.S. The note is in MS, and  
for some reason one page is written on  
both sides, the others not. You kindly  
said you'd have it typed up. (Could  
you send me a copy)

P.P.S. On the State Dept, did you see  
an article I wrote in the Washington Post  
April 2? I'll send you a copy (& also  
Henry Faulstich's last piece on the Prime Minister)

~~Soviet~~

## Soviet Crises: May 1990

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Robert G. ... 1990

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Robert Cyner  
8 May 1990