

12-0263

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

February 15, 1962

FROM: [REDACTED]

SUBJECT: Soviet Visit Report

Attached is an East-West report based on an article by K.A. Yelchaninov that was published in the October 21, 1961, issue of Russkaya Mysl under the title, Impressions of the Soviet Union.

Mr. Yelchaninov spent five weeks in Moscow as a guide at the French Exhibition in August-September, 1961.

He was urged by many Soviet visitors to the French pavilion to tell the West about what he had seen and heard in the Soviet Union: "We know what Communism is, let the West know about it."

cc: Messrs. [REDACTED]

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Mr. Yelchaninov's conclusion is that it is hard to be objective in evaluating the USSR. Tourists often claim to have seen everything after a week's stay--and usually their impressions reflect the political views they had upon arrival in the Soviet Union. Those who have "leftist" tendencies see only the bright side--the gay young people, the crowded museums and churches. Those who are anti-Soviet gloat over the queues, the rudeness of the salesladies, the shabby crowds, the ramshackle little houses.

From their different angles both sides are right, but the truth about the regime and life in the Soviet Union lies deeper than these conflicting statements.

"Material things are unimportant," said a young writer to Yelchaninov. "Today we go hungry--tomorrow we may have enough to fill our bellies. The trouble is that we are ruled by a bunch of bigwigs, they think for us, they solve our problems twenty years in advance--there is nothing for us to do but join in the chorus and sing their praises, or keep our mouths shut." Or, here is what a Soviet poet said: "We value freedom as a means of making a choice, not because we like to choose, but because we want to choose without compulsion. And this is the Soviet tragedy--the people are groaning under the pressure of a chronic economic crisis, and we, the intelligentsia, have to say and write things we do not believe."

Yelchaninov believes that this continuous lying is the key to the Soviet riddle: everybody lies--the writers, the radio, the press, the officials, Khrushchev. Some lie from conviction, some under duress.

The young poet produced an anthology of his poetry with the lines he had to change under pressure. A public worker showed Yelchaninov an article about the happy life of the Soviet man. It had been published under his name, but he never wrote it. A reporter was given the assignment of describing the blissful existence of kolkhoz workers just after their cows had been taken away from them and put into a common herd. He spoke to them, listened to their complaints--the kolkhoz women cried over the loss of their cows. When he got back to Moscow, he wrote a glowing article about their happy lives.

And this is what the tourist cannot see at first glance--the truth behind the tissue of lies. He is usually charmed by the "Beriozkis," the Russian "babas," "bublichkis," folk art. One journalist said: "If you only knew how I loathe the Piatnitsky choir, Ukrainian dancing, the "beriozkis," all the gaudy tinsel! Some Western tourists fall for "sputniks," others for folk dancing, "babas" in colorful headscarves, and few have an idea of the hardships of the Soviet people behind the edifice of lies."

Life in the Soviet Union is easiest for those who have a higher technical education and specialize in some limited field which makes them indispensable to the regime.

On the other hand, the Soviet intelligentsia is expected to kow-tow to the regime and to "bring up conscious citizens."

A writer who has been silent for a long time comes under suspicion, especially if he does not shave: this is a sign of free-thinking and interest in the West. "I have one foot in France and the other in Siberia," said a bearded student of philosophy. An art student said: "The trouble is not that we have to paint the kolkhoznik, but that the kolkhoznik teach us how to paint kolkhozniki."

All the Soviet elite is expected to help build Communism, even if they are sick of Soviet Socialism. And who wouldn't be, hearing platitudes such as these over the radio: "This is a sunny socialist morning of a Communist day," or, "Life is full of happiness and victories, and how could it be otherwise, since..." or, "Our life is beautiful." From morning until night loudspeakers in parks of culture and rest promise happiness under Communism. No wonder that strollers in the parks can hardly wait for "culture" to end and for a rest to begin.

Young people are avid readers of Western literature. Very few contemporary Western writers have been translated, but the little that is published is snapped up immediately. Hemingway, Saint-Exupery, Eluard and R. Rolland are tremendously popular.

The literature, theatre and arts section of the French exhibition was constantly mobbed and the guides were hardly able to cope with the avalanche of questions. Excessive curiosity was the undoing of many Soviet citizens. They were watched at the exhibition, and those who spent too much time talking to the French personnel were subjected to long interrogations.

Yelchaninov received frequent requests from students for books that were banned in the USSR, e.g. - the Bible, or works by Sartre and Camus. They usually returned these books after copying parts that were of interest to them. The desire for free thought is so great among students that some were learning Polish only to be able to read Western literature in Polish translation available with difficulty in the USSR.

On the basis of talks with Soviet citizens, Yelchaninov makes the following breakdown of their attitudes towards the regime:

1. Fanatical devotion, especially in youth imbued with the spirit of Marxism. Their rigid dogmatism and total inability to understand Western thinking precludes all discussion. Many students, however, who lose faith in Marxism and know nothing outside of dialectical materialism, become disciples of Jean Paul Sartre without even knowing it.

This category includes students--especially young girls--

who are glad not to have to think for themselves and just parrot their lesson on dialectical materialism.

2. Defenders of Marxism. These are primarily the idealists who believe in a transition from socialism to Communism. They recognize the shortcomings of the regime, the hardships of Soviet life, often they even disagree with Khrushchev and Party policies, but say: "Come to this country in ten to fifteen years and you will see!" And others: "So what does the West have to offer us instead of Communism? Capitalism?! No, thank you." They are totally ignorant of the West and its political setup.

Naturally, the hundreds of thousands of higher Party functionaries, who depend on the regime for their living, are also loyal to it, although many join the Party for tactical reasons only. A scientist told Yelchaninov that his sons were all Party members, but added: "You should hear what they say about the Party and coming Communism when they are at home!"

People grumble about the shortage of food and the endless standing in lines. The following anecdote was circulating in Moscow: "In ten years we will all have our own helicopters. What for? Well, if there is a rumor that potatoes are available in Kiev, we fly there and buy potatoes. When the papers announce that a shipment of cooking oil has arrived in Gorki--off we fly to Gorki!"

✓ 3. Most of the people Yelchaninov spoke to, however, accept Communism as an unavoidable evil. This group includes many young people who love their country and Russian culture. They lead a double life: on the one hand they are loyal to the regime, attend compulsory meetings; and on the other hand, they live in their own private world, wrapped up in the Russian classics--Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, the symbolists. They can talk for hours of Blok, Gumilev, Belii, Mandelstamm. And, above all, they seek the truth and hate lies and hypocrisy.

✓ 4. Yelchaninov also met people who hate the regime for the sufferings it brought. It is interesting to note that this group consists of either elderly people who still remember the old regime, or the very young; people in their fifties, who were brought up under Stalin, are hard to approach and avoid discussions.

✓ To sum up, the Soviet youth and intelligentsia are beginning to think more for themselves (the poet Yevtushenko is one of the many examples). It is hard to predict where this will end, but if the authorities do not take drastic steps to curb this trend, it may grow with elemental force.

Religion in the USSR

Since the publication of the new CPSU program, the anti-religious drive has been intensified. In recent months 1,500 churches, many monasteries and three of the eight seminaries were closed. In fact, the position of the Russian Orthodox Church is much worse than it was under Stalin. It is being oppressed by excessive taxation: 80% of its income from donations goes to the government.

Churches are closed in the following manner: an official, assigned to each bishop, sends for a priest and takes away his "license"--and so his parish is closed.

Monasteries and convents are closed at night. Monks get a few days notice. Older monks are given the choice of moving either to friends or to homes for the aged; the young ones are sent to work in production. The remaining monks and nuns are taken away at night in trucks to an unknown destination. The monastery is closed and surrounded by a cordon of militia in the morning.

The remaining churches are filled to capacity, mostly by women over fifty. Yelchaninov met many young engineers, chemists, physicians who believed in God but were afraid to be seen in a church lest they be dismissed from work or universities.

One priest said to Yelchaninov: "How lucky you are to be able to practice your religion in a free church which is not ruled by the Communist regime like ours. Profit from this freedom and tell the world about the persecution of our Church."