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Memorandum by George Kennan , 'Russia – Seven Years Later' (excerpt)

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Summary:

George Kennan describes Stalin's character, underlining the importance of his nationality, ignorance of the west, and his seclusion. Kennan further warns that Stalin's advisors are not interested in collaborating with western democracies, and that Russia's internal police regime is developed beyond its foreign policy.

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English

Contents:

Who are these Men who Sleep so well?
(Excerpt from a Memorandum by George Kennan)

Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin, now in the sixty-fifth year of his life and the twentieth year of his power in Russia, is the most powerful and the least known of the world's rulers. Only a handful of foreigners have ever seen him. None have ever had any intimate contact with him. No one knows exactly where, or with whom, he lives. His personal life remains a mystery which not even the curiosity of the American press has been able to penetrate. Only his political figure is apparent; and that figure is revealed at best in a series of brief and enigmatic glimpses.

From the standpoint of one who would understand Russia today, there are certain points about Stalin which it is important to remember.

First – that he is a Georgian. That strange law of psychology which has more than once caused great peoples to accept the rule of obscure and untypical persons from their own peripheries has brought Stalin from the barren hills of Georgia to the seclusion of the Kremlin. He does not now consider himself much of a Georgian; and history will have to admit that he has become one of the greatest of Russian national figures. But he has not lost the characteristics of his native environment. Courageous but wary; quick to anger and suspicion but patient and persistent in the execution of his purposes; capable of acting with great decision or of waiting and dissembling, as circumstances may require; outwardly modest and simple, but jealous of the prestige and dignity of the state which he heads; not learned, yet shrewd and pitilessly realistic; exacting in his demands for loyalty, respect and obedience; a keen and unsentimental student of men – he can be, like a true Georgian hero, a great and good friend or an implacable, dangerous enemy. It is difficult for him to be anything in between.

Second – his ignorance of the western world. Stalin's youth is shrouded in the mists of underworld revolutionary activity – largely in his native Caucasus. From that he graduated into the Dostoyevskian atmosphere of revolutionary conspiracy in European Russia. His life has known only what Lenin called "the incredibly swift transition from wild violence to the most delicate deceit”. A brief glimpse of Stockholm, in his younger days, left little or no impression on his fevered imagination. Of western life in general, he could not possibly understand very much. The placid give and take of Anglo-Saxon life, in particular: the tempering of all enmity and all intimacy, the balancing function of personal self-respect, the free play of opposing interests -- these things would remain incomprehensible, implausible, to him.

Third – his seclusion. Foreign representatives, fretting over their isolation in Moscow's diplomatic ghetto, should bear in mind that of all the people in Moscow Stalin himself is probably the most isolated. It is doubtful if in the course of the past fifteen years he has ever had the sensation of being alone or of mingling unobserved with other people. During all this time, he has probably never known what it is to walk down a street by the light of day, like anybody else, and to see life as others see it. If not even the humble diplomatic secretary can visit a Russian provincial town quietly and normally, on his own, without swarms of guides and escorts, without elaborate preparations for his reception, without vodka and caviar and speeches, think what it must be for Stalin to try to catch his countrymen off guard. His bent from his Kremlin office to his datcha is no more revealing than the well-worn cowpaths of the Moscow diplomatic corps; and the precautions taken for his safety must make it nearly as hard for him to survey Moscow as it is for Moscow to survey him. The Moscow police, they say, are instructed to view with suspicion diplomats found to be anywhere except in an automobile, in a museum, or at the "Swan Lake" ballet. Stalin's life is even poorer. His visits to the ballet are few. And the whole Kremlin, when closely observed, bears a depressing resemblance to a vast and chilly museum.

Why do I single out for attention these three aspects of Stalin's life and character? I single them out because they all point to the same thing: namely, to his extreme dependence on his own friends and advisors. In every authoritarian state, political life too readily becomes a struggle for access to the ruler and for the control of his sources of information. In Russia, with its passion for secrecy and conspiracy, this has been particularly pronounced. In the case of Stalin's relations to the western world the role of his political intimates – in view of his own ignorance, his extreme seclusion, and his suspicious Georgian nature – belittle short of decisive. In the conviction of the writer it is here, in the relations between Stalin and his advisors, that we must seek the explanations for the puzzling, often contradictory, manifestations of the Soviet attitude toward western nations.

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The most indisputable, and perhaps the most important, point about Stalin’s advisors is that for the past six years there has been practically no change among them. After a period of turn-over in high government positions unprecedented except in the most wildly revolutionary eras, Russian political life suddenly froze, about 1938, into an equally unprecedented immobility. There were not even any noteworthy deaths. The Kremlin, having successfully defied so many other rules of human behavior, seemed now to have defied even the laws of human frailty. The deductions of those cynical wits among the foreign observers who insisted that no one could survive the purges who was not endowed with the gift of immortality now seem to be finding confirmation. For years there have been, as far as the outside world is aware, no changes of note in the composition of the Politbureau, the Central Committee of the Party, or even the leading provincial party positions. This is extraordinary enough for a country that has been through two major reorientations of foreign policy and a military ordeal which rocked the state to its foundations. It is even more extraordinary for a political system which has never before failed to produce a few sacrificial political victims for every major reverse in the fortunes of the country. At best, it is an unhealthy situation, and one which will take on added importance when the war is over. The danger, in Russian circumstances, is that if changes are not made gradually and in good time, they may come all at once and start another landslide of panic, intrigue and denunciation similar to that which took place at the time of the purges.

What strikes the western observer most strongly about this state of affairs is that it means there is not a single person in a prominent position in Russia who is in any way personally identified with the present policy of collaboration with the western democracies. There is not a person who was not doing business pretty much at the same old stand back in the days when policies – and let us hope convictions – were entirely different.

To those who have come to Russia recently for the first time there is nothing unusual in the association of such men as Molotov, Vyshinski, Lozovski, and Manuilski with the policies of Moscow and Teheran. But in the minds of those whose memories of Russia are longer these names arouse strange images.

One can see the figure of Molotov at the Ceremonial Meeting of the Moscow Soviet in the Great Theatre, on November 6, 1939, denouncing England and France ("who are constantly dragging into war not only their own population but also the populations of the dominions and colonies") for opposing Hitler in this "criminal" war. They recall that only a few days earlier, at the Session of the Supreme Soviet, he had called England and France "the instigators of the second imperialist war" and had accused them of portraying themselves deceitfully “as fighters for the democratic rights of the peoples".

One sees before him once again the figure of Vyshinski in the Prosecutor's box in the

Hall of Columns. It is the trial of Bukharin; and Vyshinski is sounding the cry of suspicious, secretive Russia against the fancied hostility of the outside world. It is not only Germany he talks about. "Here in this dock", he thunders, pointing an accusing finger at the last of the great names of the Revolution, "is not just one anti-Soviet group, the agents of just one foreign intelligence service. Here in the dock are a number of anti-Soviet groups, the agents of the intelligence services of a number of foreign powers hostile to the U.S.S.R. . . . . Implicated in the case are . . . . at least . . . . four foreign intelligence services, the Japanese, German, Polish, and British and – it goes without saying, all the other foreign intelligence services which maintain friendly, so-called operative contact with the above-mentioned intelligence services". "This trial", one can hear him conclude, "has reminded us again that two worlds face each other as irreconcilable and deadly enemies – the world of capitalism and the world of socialism".

Memories shift to Lozovski the old operative head of the Red International of Labor Unions, now – like Vyshinski, – Assistant People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs. For years on end he harangued despairing foreign workers of the Profintern, gathered together in Moscow for the improvement of their morals. He pleaded with them above all things to understand that apparent Soviet departures from the quest of world revolution did not mean that the goal had been lost sight of. The situation has changed, he would cry, and the tactics change. If any particular slogan has outlived its usefulness or any particular formula needs to be changed for a new one, that doesn't mean that everything that there was in the past was wrong. Could he say that today, one wonders? And would he still maintain, as he was maintaining in 1935, that no force in the world will prevent the collapse of capitalism and the victory of the working class over the bourgeoisie.

And Manuilski, the old work-horse of the Comintern, now People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the Ukraine. At the recent armistice negotiations with the Rumanians, which he attended as the foreign minister of a neighboring state to Rumania, he was friendly, agreeable, concerned for the condition of his liberated Ukraine, anxious that the British and American Ambassadors should come to Kiev and view the destruction wrought by the Germans there. Did he really want their sympathy? Had he forgotten that in 1939 he was saying: The years will pass. Not a stone will remain unturned of the cursed capitalistic structure, of its wars, its reaction, its vileness, its bestiality and its progressive savagery. People will think back on the days of capitalism as on a bad dream. Poor Manuilski. The years have passed. The upturned stones are to be found everywhere: in socialism and in capitalism alike – in Kiev as well as in London. The bad dreams of this age are of war and occupation, not of capitalism. Does he know that this analysis was unsound? Does he regret the words of 1939?

The men I have mentioned are all men prominently connected with Russia's formal diplomatic relations with the western world. They are men who have contact with foreigners in their work and presumably access to the foreign press and foreign literature. Possibly this has indeed widened their horizons to some extent. But what about those other leading figures of the regime whose voice in the inner councils of state is obviously greater than the voice of any of these four, except possibly Molotov? What about such men as Beriya, Zhdanov, Shcherbakov, Andreyev, Kaganovich, etc.? What advice do these men give to Stalin about foreign policy?

These prominent Soviet leaders know little of the outside world. They have no personal knowledge of foreign statesmen. To them, the vast pattern of international life, political and economic, can provide no associations, can hold no significance, except in what they conceive to be its bearing on the problems of Russian security and Russian internal life. It is possible tha the conceptions of these men might occasionally achieve a rough approximation to reality, and their judgments a similar approximation to fairness; but it is not likely. Independence of judgment has never been a strong quality of leading Communist figures. There is evidence that they are

as often as not the victims of their own slogans, the slaves of their own propaganda. To keep a level head in the welter of propaganda and auto-suggestion with which Russia has faced the world for the past twenty years would tax the best efforts of a cosmopolitan scholar and philosopher. These men are anything but that. God knows what strange images and impressions are created in their minds by what they hear of life beyond Russia's borders. God knows what conclusions they draw from all this, and what recommendations they make on the basis of those conclusions.

There is serious evidence for the hypothesis that there are influences in the Kremlin which place the preservation of a rigid police regime in Russia far ahead of the [ILLEGIBLE] development of Russia's foreign relations, and which are therefore strongly opposed to any association of Russia with foreign powers except on Russia's own terms. These terms would include the rigid preservation of the conspiratorial nature of the Communist party, of the secrecy of the working of the Soviet state, of the isolation of the population from external influences, of feelings of mistrust of the outside world and dependence on the Soviet regime among the population, of the extreme restriction of all activities of foreigners in the Soviet Union, and the use of every means to conceal Soviet reality from world opinion.

There is reason to believe that these influences have a certain measure of control over the information and advice that reach Stalin. Certainly there has been an appreciable relaxation, as compared with seven years ago, in the restrictions on association between foreigners and Russians; and representatives of Russia's allies continue to be treated today with no less suspicion than was shown to German representatives in the days of the most violent anti-Fascist press polemics, prior to the conclusion of the Non-Aggression Pact. Fortunately, however, there is as yet no reason to conclude that this issue is finally decided and that the isolationistshaveentirelywontheday.Theoverwhelmingsentimentofthe country is against them, so much so that this may become a serious internal issue in the aftermath of the war. So is the pressure of events in international life. They are undoubtedly balanced off by many men who have a healthier, a saner, and a more worthy conception of Russia's mission in the world. But that this xenophobian group exists and that it speaks with a powerful voice in the secret councils of the Kremlin is evident. And that it is in no way accessible to the pleas or arguments of responsible people in the outside world is no less clear.

As long as this situation endures, the great nations of the west will unavoidably be in a precarious position in their relations with Russia. They will never be able to be sure when, unbeknownst to them, people of whom they have no knowledge, acting on motives utterly obscure, will go to Stalin with misleading information and with arguments to be used to their disadvantage – information which they cannot correct and arguments which they have no opportunity to rebut. As long as this possibility exists, as long as it is not corrected by a freer atmosphere for the forming of acquaintances and the exchange of views, it is questionable whether ever the friendliest of relations could be considered sound and dependable.

Those men of good will, among the foreign representatives in Moscow, for whom the relations of Russia with the world at large have become one of the great experiences and hopes of contemporary life, may go on with their patient work of unraveling the never-ending tangle of misunderstanding and difficulties which lie across the path of Russia's foreign relations. They will continue to be borne up in this trial of patience by their unanimous faith in the greatness of the Russian people and by their knowledge of the need of the world for Russia's talents. But at heart they all know that until the Chinese wall of the spirit has been broken down, as the actual Chinese wall of Moscow's business district was recently broken – until new avenues of contact and of vision are opened up between the Kremlin and the world around it – they can have no guarantee that their efforts will meet with success and that the vast creative abilities of Russia will not lead to the tragedy, rather than to the rescue, of western civilization.