Conversations with Two Ivans

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Conversations with Two Ivans*

The First Ivan:

Let's say you have decided to take a fact finding trip to Moscow. This is how it might go. You leave Kennedy Airport the evening of February 13 on the weekly Aeroflat direct flight. Aeroflat is the Russian state airline. As you round the corner of the connecting ramp and enter the long but narrow plane body, you immediately sense that you are in a different world. The air smells dusty and vaguely of sweat. You trip slightly because of a roughly sewn patch on the carpet. Half of the passengers appear to be Russian. The Russians are mostly men between the ages of 45 and 65 dressed in grey/brown, shapeless suits. Most take off their jackets and hang them on the special hook on the seat in front. Some take off their shoes, as well.

As you settle in your seat the Russians around you are talking excitedly among themselves. Like Latin peoples, Russians can talk and listen at the same time. When the plane gets airborne the cabin takes on the atmosphere of a workingman's bar. Vodka and cucumber slices are passed around, and the Russians naturally bring you into the conversation.

"My name is Ivan," the big Russian seated next to you says. "Most of us are Agricultural Engineers who have been to an international convention in Des Moines, Iowa." "Actually," he says pensively, "I was born a peasant. I grew up in a one-room cabin with four brothers and sisters, my mother, my father (until he went off to the Great Patriotic War and was killed at Stalingrad), two cousins and my grandmother. Our village had no water pump, no school, only dirt-mud paths for roads and only the simplest horsedrawn machines.

"Conditions are much better now," he continues. "Not like on your Iowa farms but much better. We now have tractors and wheat combines." As an afterthought, Ivan adds, "The last night at the convention we were addressed by that great capitalist who is the Director of your Centipede Factory, the enterprise that makes your big, yellow tractors." You are now getting used to Ivan's wrong choice of English words, so you translate "the Centipede Factory" into "the Caterpillar Corporation".

The plane took off at about 8:30 New York time. The black night quickly turned into a dreary day; your body clock says it is just morning, but the loudspeaker an-

*This little story was my opening statement when I spoke to the "Great Decisions" forum at the Ford Museum auditorium the night of February 13, 1984.
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ounces that it is 3:00 in the afternoon, and that you will soon be approaching Moscow.
You look out the window. Nothing but pine trees and snow. Thirty minutes later
a few windy, one-lane roads appear. Then a paved two-lane road and low buildings.
Now, tall apartment buildings and a city of eight million people emerges.
“Where are the suburbs?” you ask Ivan.
He laughs at your question and launches into a geography lesson. “The USSR is
a two-continent country, 2½ times the size of the United States,” he tells you. “But,
we only have 40 million more people. Most of our country is in the latitudes of Canada
and Alaska and is thinly populated. Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev and the few other cities
are thus urban oases in the forests and steppes."
He goes on to tell you that the USSR is like a huge rectangle that stretches west-
east, a distance equal to flying from San Francisco to London, England. “Look at
a world globe sometime,” he says, “and see how the USSR goes almost half way around.”
He pronounces it “world glob”. On reflection you decide that he wasn’t that far off.
“The USSR,” he continues, “spans eleven time zones. When we land I will phone
my brother who is an electrical engineer in Vladivostok. When we are about to hang
up he will say ‘Good night, Ivan.’ I will say to him ‘Have a nice day, brother.’ Then
I will sit down to supper, and he will sit down to tomorrow’s breakfast.
“I love my country,” says Ivan, with a deep sigh. There is dampness in his eyes.
“But, we have problems because of our vastness. God gave us all kinds of riches: gold,
diamonds, zinc, manganese, nickel, oil. Oil,” he says again, “Ten years ago our patriotic
geologists told us that there were oil reserves in Siberia east of the Ural Mountains.
Then they explored farther and told us that the reserves were lakes. Now they tell
us the lakes are an ocean. Siberia is floating on oil;” he says, bobbing in his seat like
he was in a boat.
“But, when God gave us these riches, he played a game with us. As in an Easter
egg hunt, he hid them in remote and unexpected places.”
“Are you religious?”, you ask Ivan.
“No, I’m an atheist”, he replies, looking at you with his brow wrinkled. “Why do
you ask?”
You wave your hand and let the matter pass.
“You see,” Ivan goes on with his geography lesson, “the great Soviet land mass is
tipped north. Our majestic mountains are on our southern border, so the mighty
Siberian rivers run north into the Arctic Ocean. For six months of the year the river
mouths are frozen, and the water backs up into huge marshes the size of Texas.
“Also, in the winter our weather comes from the Arctic; in the summer from the
deserts and the mountains. What we wouldn’t give for your Great Lakes.”
Ivan sighs, "In the short summer thaw the mosquitoes and the gnats swarm so thickly they can drive you mad. They can blind you. If you get too many of them in your lungs, you can suffocate."

Ivan talks on as the plane descends. "We have another serious problem that is part geographical and part historical. Our boundaries in the west, south and east have few natural barriers. Thus, we have been invaded and overrun too many times: Mongols, Tatars, Persians, Turks, Swedes, Poles, Napoleon's French, the Germans twice in the twentieth century. In those instances when we turned back the invader it was because we could retreat and let General Winter and Colonel Cold take their toll.

"To give us these buffer lands we have united along our borders peoples of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Some of these border peoples you know about, for example, the Estonians, the Latvians, the Lithuanians and the Ukrainians."

Ivan's eyes flash as he now remembers and says, "Joseph Stalin, like your Jimmy Carter, was a Georgian."

"The Muslim peoples in our Central Asian Republics are the most troublesome because of their high birth rate. Without much enthusiasm Ivan says, "We Russians will have to learn how to share power with our ethnic groups the way you Anglos-Americans have to learn how to share power with your Blacks and Hispanics."

The Second Ivan:

On your first morning in Moscow, February 15, you wake up to the roar of five snowplows which, like wheat combines, are in tandem, pushing away the night's eight-inch accumulation of snow.

By the time you have eaten breakfast and are on your way to your morning appointment, it is ten o'clock, and the sun is now up, a cold, pale sun just over the east-south horizon. It looks like a misplaced winter moon.

You scurry through the frost and the heavily padded pedestrians, past kerchiefed women using twig brooms to sweep the sidewalk bare of snow. You go down into the subway tunnel. The station is clean and decorated in polished marble. The train comes immediately, and 20 minutes later you emerge above ground across the city in front of the heavy stone building that houses the Institute of North American Affairs, the Politburo think tank on what is going on in the United States. There you are introduced to Ivan, the Institute's 35-year-old Assistant Director.

You notice immediately that this Ivan is confident and intelligent. He is cordial, but not warm like the Ivan on the plane. There is something else about this Ivan that is unsettling. His English, or rather, his American is perfect. No, not perfect either because it is colloquial.

"My God," Ivan sensei said to the foreign diplomat at the American school, and the foreign diplomat at the American school, and the foreign diplomat at the American school, and the foreign diplomat at the American school, and the foreign diplomat at the American school, and the foreign diplomat at the American school.


Ivan begins the conversation with the question: 'Is there a war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union?'

Ivan explains that our revolution was to isolate us from the rest of the world in 1933. Well, I don't know if that's a good idea. But I didn't know if that's a good idea. But I didn't know if that's a good idea. But I didn't know if that's a good idea. But I didn't know if that's a good idea.

Ivan pauses, and then says, 'If we see the U.S. is winning, we will change our revolution to make us stronger.'

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"My God," you say to yourself. "He sounds like my brother! He even looks like my brother."

Ivan senses your unease. He tells you that his father, a journalist, was an early convert to the revolution; and, since he was literate and educated, he was taken into the foreign service. Ivan tells you that when he was a boy, his father was a senior diplomat at the United Nations. "So," Ivan says, "I grew up in New York City where I went to American schools and had American friends."

The purpose of your meeting with this Ivan is to discuss Soviet-U.S. relations. "Let's start with a review of history," Ivan suggests.

"Fine," you say, not expecting any surprises here. You were good in history in high school, and you got an "A" in Western Civilizations your freshman year in college.

Ivan begins. "Your American history professors have been arguing for years over the question of 'Who started the cold war?' To me, this is a silly question. Hostility between the capitalists and the communists, the U.S. and the new Russia, began automatically and immediately. Of course, the capitalists would never cede power to the communists without a fight. And fight you did:"

Ivan explains, "In 1917, as a junior partner to the Anglo-French effort to overthrow our revolution, President Wilson sent 9,000 American soldiers into Archangel and Murmansk:"

"I didn't know that," you say.

Ivan nods sympathetically toward your ignorance. He says, "Several years ago there was a CBS TV special about your intervention in the Russian Civil War. It was called The Forgotten War." Ivan adds, "Many of the soldiers who fought, froze and died fighting our Red Army were from Michigan. Look it up when you get back to the states."

Ivan continues, "When the U.S. did get into the war, the Anglo-American policy was to delay at the expense of the Russians. We begged you to open a second front..."
when we had our backs on the bank of the Volga at Stalingrad. Instead, you landed in North Africa. Since you couldn't invade North Africa and France at the same time, this told the Nazis that they could redeploy their armies in France to the Russian front." Again you say nothing.

"When your cross-channel landing finally did come, in June 1944, we Russians had already stopped the Germans and were pushing them out of eastern Europe. This may sound ungrateful to you," Ivan says, "but we see the D-Day landing as Anti-Russian. Its purpose was to stop the Red Army as far east as possible."

"What about lend-lease?" you ask.

"Too little, too late," Ivan replies. "You were not our ally during World War II," he adds. "We just happened to be fighting a common enemy. What assistance you gave us was in your own self-interest."

"Do you know what our comparative war deaths were?" he asks. He answers his own question, "We had 20 million killed. You Americans, in the five years between December, 1941 and August, 1945, lost 300,000. We Russians lost about that many just in the 900-day Siege of Leningrad.

"As for material destruction," he continues, "we lost 40 percent of our cities and 40 percent of our production capacity. Our former Premier, Nikita Khruschev, was a crude man, but he expressed the gut feeling of most Russians when he said:

'The U.S. Capitalists were getting fat during World War II, while the USSR was being destroyed.'"

It is now after 12:30, and Ivan invites you to have lunch with him in the Institute's cafeteria. It is simple but good food. Over lunch Ivan chats about the good and bad aspects of life in New York and Moscow. He is more relaxed now, but you are still a bit shaken by his "history lecture" which showed the U.S. to be mean, sinister and unreliable.

Ivan then gets serious again, but this time he is gentle. "When you get home re-read and re-think U.S.-Soviet history. This time include some Soviet sources in your reading. I know that our standard Russian history books are distorted," he says, "but I also think that your American history books are warped."

After lunch you have a shorter session with Ivan to talk about the present stage in the U.S.-USSR conflict.

You ask Ivan, "What are you committed to?"

He replies, "We communists, like you capitalists, are also missionaries. We, too, want to make the world a better place. You don't trust us," he adds. "But, I hope the morning history lesson shows you that we have reasons to distrust you also. Still, peaceful
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Ivan goes on. "Our two great nations will continue to compete for the minds of
men, and we will never agree about ends. With effort, however, and some mutual
understanding, we can agree on the rules of this competition."

How do we begin to understand one another?" you ask.

"For starters," Ivan answers, "stop calling us devils and thugs. You don't judge the
West Germans by Hitler. Why do you continue to judge us Russians by Stalin?"

When you leave Ivan and the Institute of North American Affairs, it is 3:30 in
the afternoon. The sun is racing for the southwest corner of the horizon. Can it get
much colder, you wonder?