

Cultural Exchange and the Cold War: Raising the Iron Curtain, by Yale Richmond.

CHAPTER 3

THE CULTURAL AGREEMENT

If we are going to take advantage of the assumption that all people want peace, then the problem is for people to get together and to leap governments—if necessary to evade governments—to work out not one method but thousands of methods by which people can gradually learn a little bit more of each other.

--Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Waging Peace*, 1956-

1961

President Dwight D. Eisenhower envisioned a people-to-people exchange, with people indeed leapfrogging governments to learn more about each other. But that was not to be for many years, and in the interim, exchanges had to be negotiated and carried out by governments with their cumbersome bureaucracies, political and security considerations, and under agreements laboriously negotiated and implemented.

Soviet ignorance of the United States was abysmal. Isolated from the outside world and continually told by their media of all the achievements of the Soviet state, the Soviet people believed that they were far better off than those who lived in the capitalist West. American knowledge of the Soviet Union was not much better.

“It is hard for us now to imagine how distant we were from each other and how little we understood each other,” writes Sergei Khrushchev, son of Nikita Khrushchev, in describing his father’s meeting with Dwight Eisenhower at the July 1955 Four-Power Summit Conference in Geneva.¹ “Living on either side of the iron curtain,” he explains, “we knew nothing about each other. Diplomats and intelligence agents supplied their leaders with information, of course, but that was not enough to gain an understanding of the other side. We had to look into each other’s eyes.”²

Eisenhower and Khrushchev did look into each other’s eyes at Geneva, and they must have liked what they saw, although it took another three years before the two sides were able to agree on a cultural agreement that would enable thousands of American and Soviet citizens to meet face to face.

At the Geneva Foreign Ministers Conference in October 1955, the United States, together with France and the United Kingdom, proposed a seventeen-point program to remove barriers to normal exchanges in the information media, culture, education, books and publications, science, sports, and tourism.³ The initiative was rejected by Molotov who accused the West of interference in Soviet internal affairs. But the Soviets did show interest in some of the proposals, and Molotov suggested that they might wish to conclude bilateral or multilateral agreements which “...could reflect what is of particular interest to the countries concerned.”⁴

Further developments had to await the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet

Union in 1956 where Khrushchev criticized Stalin and signaled changes in Soviet policy which included peaceful coexistence and increased contacts with the West.

After the congress the Soviets moved swiftly to establish exchanges with the West. Cultural agreements were signed with Norway and Belgium later that year, and with the United Kingdom and France in 1957. Negotiations with the United States began on October 29, 1957 and a U.S.-Soviet agreement on exchanges was signed on January 27, 1958.⁵ As an executive agreement rather than a treaty, it did not require Senate approval, thereby avoiding a prolonged domestic debate.

The accord was titled "Agreement Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on Exchanges in the Cultural, Technical, and Educational Fields."⁶ Its scope, however, was much broader and included exchanges in science and technology, agriculture, medicine and public health, radio and television, motion pictures, exhibitions, publications, government, youth, athletics, scholarly research, culture, and tourism. Commonly called the Lacy-Zarubin Agreement, it was named after its two chief negotiators, William S.B. Lacy, President Eisenhower's Special Assistant on East-West Exchanges, and Georgi Z. Zarubin, Soviet Ambassador to the United States. As an executive agreement rather than a treaty, it did not require ratification by the U.S. Senate, which helped to avoid a prolonged and bitter debate in a forum which had only recently witnessed the challenges of McCarthyism.

The initial agreement was for a two-year period but it was periodically renegotiated and, during detente when both sides felt more comfortable with exchanges, its validity was extended to three years. The final agreement in the series, signed by Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev at their 1985 Geneva Summit, was for six years and was allowed to wither away when controls on both sides had been relaxed to the point where an agreement was deemed no longer necessary.

Signing a cultural agreement was a new departure for the United States. After World War II, the United States, determined to democratize its former enemies, had large exchange programs with Germany and Japan but those were mostly one-way exchanges, from Germany and Japan to the United States, and they were administered and funded by the United States alone.⁷

Also new for the U.S. government was its partnership with the private sector in funding and carrying out exchanges under the agreement. Many of the activities under the cultural agreement were the responsibility of the private sector—science and technology, radio and television, motion pictures, publishing, youth, education, performing arts, athletics, and tourism—and federal government participation in many of those fields was only peripheral. In the Soviet Union, by contrast, all of the activities were governmental. Here, at the start, was one of the many difficulties which would emerge as two radically different societies attempted to establish contacts and exchanges over a wide range of activities.

On the U.S. side there was no precedent for such an agreement. Thousands of foreign students come to the United States each year without intergovernmental agreements, as well as specialists in technology, science, culture, performing arts, athletics, and other fields covered by the agreement. Why then, was such an agreement necessary? How could the federal government agree to regulate, in its relations with another government, the international activities of U.S.

universities, industry, the media, and its many and varied cultural institutions?

The simple answer is that the Soviet leaders wanted an agreement and made it a condition to having exchanges. They were accustomed to putting things on paper, signed by their political authorities at an appropriately high level. In a country where the government and the communist party controlled practically everything, it would have been inconceivable to conduct exchanges with another country, particularly the leader of the capitalist West, without a formal agreement which spelled out exactly who and what would be exchanged, under what conditions, and how the costs would be shared. Moreover, with their highly centralized government and bureaucratic planning procedures, the Soviets needed an agreement to enable their participating ministries and agencies to budget in advance for exchanges and to make plans for the agreed activities. But, as many governments and private organizations would learn in the following years, signing an exchange agreement with the Soviets was one challenge, implementing it was another and far more difficult challenge.

For the Americans, having an agreement ensured that the the exchanges would be conducted on a reciprocal basis and that the Soviet Union would be open to American participants. An East-West Contacts Staff, established at the State Department in 1957, had been sending scientific, technical, and cultural delegations and individuals to the Soviet Union even before the cultural agreement was signed. But the exchange traffic was increasing rapidly in both directions, and the United States needed an agreement to ensure that the principles of equality, reciprocity, and mutual benefit would be observed. Without the cultural agreement, it is questionable how much reciprocity there would have been in the exchanges.

The Soviet agencies responsible for the exchanges, as well as the officials who conducted them, also needed the protective cover of an agreement to justify their exchanges with the United States. It was only five years after the death of Stalin when the cultural agreement was signed, and no one in the Soviet Union could say then whether Soviet policy might again change. Finally, the Soviets, in general, liked bilateral agreements with the United States, believing that they lent legitimacy to their regime and implied equality between the superpowers.

To a great extent, the initial agreement was the result of interest by President Dwight Eisenhower in encouraging people-to-people exchanges. As Eisenhower put it, he had long advocated

...this kind of direct people-to-people exchange as one fine, progressive step toward peace in the world. In September of 1956 I initiated a broad-scale People-to-People program—an effort to stimulate private citizens in many fields (the arts, education, athletics, law, medicine, business) to organize themselves to reach across the sea and national boundaries to their counterparts in other lands.⁸

U.S. objectives, as stated in a National Security Council directive (NSC 5607), were, among others, to broaden and deepen relations with the Soviet Union by expanding contacts between people and institutions; involve the Soviets in joint activities and develop habits of cooperation with the United States; end Soviet isolation and inward orientation by giving the Soviet Union a broader view of the world and of itself; improve U.S. understanding of the Soviet Union through access to its institutions and people; and obtain the benefits of long-range cooperation in culture,

education, and science and technology.⁹

The Soviet objectives in the exchanges were not openly stated but, from a study of how they conducted the exchanges, they can be presumed to have included the following: to obtain access to U.S. science and technology, and learn more about the United States, its main adversary; support the view that the Soviet Union was the equal of the United States by engaging Americans in bilateral activities; promote the view that the Soviet Union was a peaceful power seeking cooperation with the United States; demonstrate the achievements of the Soviet people; give vent to the pent-up demand of Soviet scholars, scientists, performing artists, and intellectuals for foreign travel and contacts; and earn foreign currency through performances abroad of Soviet artists.

These differences in objectives were to create difficulties in administering the exchanges. As Nikita Khrushchev pointed out:

The Americans wanted a much broader exchange of tourists, scientists and students.... Many of their suggestions were clearly intended to make us open our borders, to increase the flow of people back and forth. They were also trying to pressure me into permitting stores to be opened in the Soviet Union where our citizens could buy American literature; in exchange they would allow us to open outlets in America where we could sell our books.¹⁰

Georgi A. Arbatov, a leading Soviet Americanologist and supporter of exchanges, also questioned the motives behind American efforts to foster exchanges and trade. But Arbatov had it right when he made the following statement in 1969, after eleven years of U.S.-Soviet exchanges:

One underlying U.S. policy is the so-called “erosion” of our social system. As a professional student of the United States I feel that this is a basic United States policy line and that it distorts all good proposals, including those regarding contacts. Professor [Zbigniew] Brzezinski speaks of promoting evolutionary changes in the Soviet Union. This is what underlies United States policy of promoting cultural contacts and trade. The Republican Party platform speaks of the Soviet system as something abnormal which can yield to the normal and refers to trade as a wedge for this purpose. This is how influential people in the United States do regard their policy and we must remain cognizant of this strategy as the framework within which exchanges are conceived. This is the main obstacle to contacts and cannot be ignored.¹¹

Among the basic tenets of the exchanges, as noted previously, were the principles of equality, reciprocity, and mutual benefit. The two sides were to treat each other as equals, approximate reciprocity was to be sought in the various exchanges, and the benefits to the two sides should be comparable. To maintain these principles, the periodic renegotiations of the cultural agreement and its annexed program of exchanges were often long and laborious. In 1962, for example, negotiations in Moscow for the third agreement in the series lasted three months before agreement was reached on all provisions of the program of exchanges. Reaching agreement on the general provisions of the cultural agreements was relatively easy, but agreement on the

specific exchanges to be conducted under the program was difficult. One continuing difficulty over the years was the exchange of large exhibitions, which will be discussed in the chapter, “Exhibitions.”

Another feature of the exchanges conducted under the agreement, as noted above, was the partnership between the U.S. federal government and the private sector. The academic exchanges, in their early years, were supported largely by the Ford Foundation and the participating American universities which waived tuition, housing, and other fees for the Soviet students and scholars they received.¹² U.S. industry covered many of the costs of the exchanges of technical delegations. The tours of Soviet performing arts groups and individual artists in the United States were conducted on a commercial basis through American impresarios such as the legendary Sol Hurok and Columbia Artists Management, Inc. Likewise, the exchange of athletic teams was the responsibility of U.S. sports associations, and the exchange of films was arranged, on the U.S. side, by Hollywood through its Motion Picture Association of America. This unique sharing of costs was useful in two respects. For the State Department and the U.S. Information Agency (USIA), it reduced the cost of the exchanges. It also brought private sector exchanges under the umbrella of an agreement which was a government-to-government initiative.

The cultural agreement and the exchanges conducted within its framework enjoyed broad public support. There was little or no opposition in the Congress, and the exchanges, for the most part, had the support of what constitutes civil society in America—academia, the media, science, churches, sports associations, industry, and the public in general.

Exchanges, nevertheless, were a barometer of U.S.-Soviet relations. When relations between the two superpowers were good, exchanges flourished and expanded; when relations chilled, exchanges suffered. During the worst years of the Vietnam War the Soviets cut back on several exchanges; and after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Carter Administration suspended high-visibility exchanges such as exhibitions, performing arts, high-level delegations, and U.S. participation in the Moscow Olympics of 1980, as well as much of the cooperation in science and technology. Scholarly exchanges, however, continued despite the ups and downs in relations, although at reduced levels at times.

Footnotes:

¹ Sergei Khrushchev, “The Cold War Through the Looking Glass,” in *American Heritage* 50 (October 1999): 37.

² Ibid.

³ For the seventeen points, see the author’s *U.S.-Soviet Cultural Exchanges, 1958-1986*:

⁴ *New York Times*, 15 November 1955.

⁵ *United States Treaties and Other International Agreements (TIAS 3975) vol.9 1958, 13-39.*

⁶ The following paragraphs discussing the agreement are from Yale Richmond, *U.S. – Soviet Cultural Exchanges, 1958-1986: Who Wins?* (Boulder, CO and London: Westview Press, 1987), 2-9.

⁸ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Waging Peace, 1956-1961* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1965), 410.

⁹ For the full text of NSC 5607, see Richmond, *U.S.-Soviet Cultural Exchanges*, 133-37.

¹⁰ Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament*, trans. and ed. Strobe Talbott (Boston and Toronto: Little Brown and Company, 1974), 409-10.

¹¹ Rapporteur's Notes, Fifth Dartmouth Conference, Rye, New York, 13-19 January 1969, translated from the Russian, emphasis in the original. Quoted in James Voorhees, "A History of the Dartmouth Conference," unpublished manuscript, 1999, chapter 3.

¹² Over the years, Ford Foundation funding for US-USSR academic exchanges was gradually reduced and replaced by funding from the State Department, U.S. Office of Education, and National Endowment for the Humanities.