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Perestroika in Partygrad

Translated from the Russian
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PROLOGUE

In the old days Partygrad was closed to foreigners. For two reasons. First, because there was nothing to show them. True, there were a few churches, but without any historical or architectural interest. And all were shut except the most wretched one of all. There was indeed an old monastery, but they'd put an anti-religious museum in it. In Partygrad one couldn't even find painted spoons, saucers or *matryoshka* dolls (which the West regards as the highest achievements of Russian national culture, though they've been made in Finland for a long time now). In the whole of Partygrad there was only one samovar, and that was in the museum of folklore.

The second reason why Partygrad was closed to foreigners was that it had a lot that foreigners *shouldn't* see: many military factories and schools, a chemical complex which turned out not so much washing-powder as - more to the point - a secret weapon, a microbiological centre for ultra-secret research and a psychiatric hospital with the most lurid reputation in dissident circles. Corrective labour camps were sited round the town, also well known to dissidents; and an atomic factory which, though devoted to peaceful ends, had still managed to turn the whole region into a highly radioactive zone. But what foreigners above all must not see were the monstrous dwellings of the people, the empty shops, the long queues and all the other attributes of Russian provincial life. But when Gorbachev began his perestroika there a fundamental change came about. Not in the sense that the country or the life got better-sometimes they became worse. What did happen was that the government's view of the country and its life worsened. Thus the first period of Soviet history ended: the fault-hiding period; and a new epoch began when deficiencies were laid bare and officially acknowledged. Moreover, the authorities laid the faults bare not so much to their own citizens, who'd been quite aware of them without official guidance, but also to the West. It is not too

much to say that the Soviet authorities initiated an orgy of admiration of their own ulcers and of boasting about them to the West.

This breakthrough coincided with the breakthrough in Soviet-Western relations. The West became interested not in the defects of the Soviet way of life but in the fact that Soviet officials recognized the presence of the defects; so that the recognition itself became the greatest virtue of the Soviet way of life. The confession by the Soviet authorities that things were done badly in the Soviet Union and that its inhabitants lived badly was interpreted by Westerners as meaning that things in the Soviet Union were *not* going so badly, and that its people did not live all that badly. In sum, the West forgave the Soviet Union all its evil, domestic and foreign, because it had confessed to an insignificant part of that evil.

Next, hordes of Soviet people rushed into the Western countries praising 'perestroika' to the skies, at the same time laying hold of everything there that was in short supply in the Soviet Union. The West began to compare Gorbachev with Peter the Great, ascribing to him the same intention to open a door into the West.

Then the Gorbachevite leadership decided to reinforce this breakthrough in Western public opinion by organizing a flood of Westerners into the Soviet Union. It was with this in view that the Central Committee of the CPSU decided to turn Partygrad into a model indicator of the progress of perestroika, in fact to make the city perestroika's 'lighthouse' and lay the place wide open to foreigners.

As we shall see, the implementation of this momentous strategic plan was to be in the hands of a native of Partygrad, none other than Pyotr Suslikov. But first we must turn our attention to an even more exalted personage.

AT THE HIGHEST LEVEL

When the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union grew weary of carrying out reforms, he would leave his office in the Kremlin earlier than usual and make his way to his dacha outside Moscow. This time he was not in a good mood, and for that there was reason enough. The

workers were not obeying him. Instead of drinking the mineral water that Mikhail Sergeyevich was advising them to drink instead of vodka, they were drinking home-made hooch and indeed any old liquid that would render them unconscious. It was harder to supply them with mineral water than with vodka. Of course the workers *could* enjoy tap-water. (In Russia it tastes no worse than the mineral water.) But they didn't cotton on to this either. Evidently there was a gap in their ideological education which had to be filled in. There must be an acceleration in ideological training. Of course in communist education the Soviet Union had outstripped the West. Now was the time to accelerate the outstripping of the West in this matter of education. It made good sense to start to switch over the workers to a system of self-education, in the same way as in economic life there was to be a switch-over to a self-financing system.

This idea did something to raise Mikhail Sergeyevich's spirits. But not for very long. He remembered that Soviet productivity had begun to grow at a quarter per cent less than had been intended, and that the Western press was beginning to hint that 'Gorbachev's great reforms are threatened with breakdown'. Why the devil were these data published in Soviet newspapers? Where did they get them from? If, as the saying goes, you force a fool to pray to God, he will be only too delighted to bash his forehead in. Glasnost is a fine thing but for heaven's sake let's cork up the bottle sometimes. . . .

At home another unpleasantness awaited Mikhail Sergeyevich. His beloved spouse, Raisa Maksimovna, whom adoring workers called 'Gorbachushka', announced categorically that she wished to go to Paris. She longed to see the Eiffel Tower. She wanted to wander around the Louvre. But there was something more important still: her beauty, which had stirred the entire world, was fading. In a year or two Nancy, the aged wife of former President Reagan, would again be calling herself 'Miss World'. The Americans had gone a long way in cosmetics; they could make an Egyptian mummy into Miss America. On no account must Raisa lose the beauty race to Nancy. That would be a crass ideological, political and even military mistake. But to keep ahead in the beauty contest Raisa Maksimovna had to have a new wardrobe from the first fashion houses of Paris.

Mikhail Sergeyevich would indeed have been glad to visit Paris himself in order to reinforce his reputation of being the planet's sexiest man and its most bewitching smiler. (In the field of smiles, at least we have caught up with and surpassed the United States.) But he couldn't manage to get away for a couple of days. Each day he had to introduce a reform, if not two or three. And he had to keep a beady eye on his colleagues. If he stood still for a moment and dithered, they would accuse him of going too far or not far enough or of deviation. Then they would chuck him out and change the reforms. And then he wouldn't be buried in the wall of the Kremlin but in the Novodevichy cemetery, somewhere near Khrushchev.

So that's why Mikhail Sergeyevich would take full power into his own hands. Then he would show them all where they got off.

With such thoughts as these, Mikhail Sergeyevich decided to invite round his dacha neighbour, Pyotr Stepanovich Suslikov. Suslikov had recently been elected a Central Committee secretary. As such he was the head-of-operations of all the Soviet institutions that watched the West, educated it in a pro-Soviet spirit and used it for the good of the Soviet people. Pyotr Stepanovich was not only of Mikhail Sergeyevich's way of political thinking and his close colleague, but also his personal friend. So Mikhail Sergeyevich asked Pyotr Stepanovich to look in for a moment for a heart-to-heart talk.

He invited him to tea, not to a bottle of vodka. Naturally, for a friendly talk vodka was preferable, but the Party had declared its implacable war on drunkenness. And so these outstanding Party leaders had to content themselves with a thoroughly boring non-alcoholic drink. If their fathers and grandfathers had lived to learn about the new custom, they would have regarded it as a betrayal of Russian national traditions owing to the machinations of Zionists and freemasons.

As we have already noted, the dachas of Mikhail Sergeyevich and Pyotr Stepanovich stood side by side. There was a special gate in the fence that separated them and this was guarded on both sides. The guard on Suslikov's territory saluted Gorbachev and breathed vodka fumes at him. Pyotr Stepanovich took note of the fact that the sentry drank 'Stolichnaya'. The guard on Gorbachev's territory also saluted Suslikov and wafted him a spirituous air that reminded the General Secretary of 'Zubrovka'. Pyotr Stepanovich

was suddenly seized with nostalgia for the old times when they, the Party leaders, also lived together in fellowship. But he pulled himself together and followed Mikhail Sergeyeovich into his study.

A HEART-TO-HEART TALK

A domestic servant who was the exact copy of Suslikov's (presumably the KGB puts its stamp on them all) served tea. To the very-last moment Pyotr Stepanovich had hoped the word 'tea' was merely a euphemism for something more substantial, so he was a bit depressed. But he didn't show it (good Party training) and greeted the tea with all the enthusiasm of a champion of the Party's general sobriety line. Actually the conversation was about the internal difficulties of implementing the said line. The two men complained of the way in which drunkards and bureaucrats were casting spanners in the works from within. Then they talked about the external difficulties and how the Western imperialists were casting spanners from without. They spoke about deficiencies, and about successes.

Then they passed on to the question of Pyotr Stepanovich himself. Mikhail Sergeyeovich said that an especially important task was about to fall upon his shoulders. Western public opinion was a great force. What counted there was the mass media. They must be made to serve the Soviet Union. But for this purpose great suppleness was needed. Nowadays hardly anybody believed in communist fairy-tales. Westerners must be led to believe that we don't believe in them much either and that we are now ready to approach everything in a practical, one could say pragmatic spirit. They love that. They think we are like themselves. This is something we must make use of.

Pyotr Stepanovich listened attentively to Mikhail Sergeyeovich's flow of words, fiddling with his spoon in the cold tea left in the cup. Mikhail Sergeyeovich had got into his stride now and was enjoying the flow of his thoughts and the intimate sincerity of his own voice. They spoke about glasnost.

'It's a funny thing, Pyotr Stepanovich, in the old days they used

to blur our failures and blow up our successes. Now it's the other way round. Now we are ashamed to speak about our successes and we blow up our failures to the skies. But what Lenin understood by glasnost means that the people should be told the whole truth, not hiding either failures or successes.'

'A very true and original thought, Mikhail Sergeyevich,' Pyotr Stepanovich agreed enthusiastically, taking a little gulp of tea and choking because of his unfamiliarity with non-alcoholic drinks. 'That's very, very important.'

'That's what I think. The thing is to let more foreigners come more often to see how we live and how we struggle with our shortcomings, and what successes we achieve. They'll see it all with their own eyes. They'll go home and tell everyone what they've seen. That will bring us substantial support in the world arena.'

'A very true and original thought, Mikhail Sergeyevich! For a long time now I've had the notion of organizing more delegations to represent the different social strata in the West and to show them not churches, museums and ballet but our actual everyday life. Let them take a look at our Soviet way of life! Of course there are things to criticize. But we have much that Westerners could envy. For example, we've no unemployment. We've no terrorists.'

Pyotr Stepanovich failed to notice that in speaking of 'what we have', he included in it 'what we *don't* have'. Mikhail Sergeyevich, accustomed from childhood to the pearls of Party rhetoric, missed the point too.

'We must choose an *oblast** where perestroika is going well and turn it into a demonstration model, one might say into a leading light of democratization,' continued Pyotr Stepanovich. 'We should use such beacons as weapons of revolutionary transformation, of all that is being achieved under your leadership. In the West, Mikhail Sergeyevich, they compare you with Peter the Great who cut a window through to the West. But I think they diminish your role. It's not a window you're cutting through but a door. Not even a door, but a gate. Or, to speak still more precisely, you're

* The Soviet administrative unit which is larger than the region and smaller than the republic.

breaking through a wall. One could say you're pulling down a Wall of China that separates . . .'

'I fully approve your notion, Pyotr Stepanovich,' Mikhail Sergeyevich cut into Suslikov's dithyrambs, as if he were not a vain person. 'But to speak of a Chinese Wall is to put it too strongly. Well, all right, a door into Europe. And then we'll break down the whole wall. What we need now is to turn lighthouses of democracy into doors into the West by calling them free zones. Let the foreigners come through these doors to us and see our revolution with their own eyes. Which oblast should we start with? What do you think?'

COMMENTARY

Having read these pages, the reader will exclaim: 'It's all an evil fabrication!' But it's not an evil fabrication, it's a good one. I knew Suslikov personally. I knew him, I can say, from his cradle. I noted above just two inaccuracies in his description. But they don't make him worse, they idealize him: Pyotr Stepanovich did not drink tea instead of vodka. Far from it. He always drank vodka instead of tea. Nor did the Epoch of Total Sobriety free him from the habit. The second inaccuracy: in the whole of his conscious life Suslikov did not speak one single grammatically correct sentence. This wasn't a matter of his being uneducated. Suslikov underwent the very highest education: in fact not one education but two, if one can count the Higher Party School run by the Central Committee of the CPSU. The fact is that to speak ungrammatically is a quality inherent in the professional Party worker.

THE CHOICE OF THE LIGHTHOUSE OF PERESTROIKA

As perestroika's lighthouse Suslikov chose the oblast of Partygrad; the very place in which he had made the grade from spermatozoid

to First Secretary/Obkom.* In his expose he omitted to mention the fact that quite a short time ago the Partygrad oblast was mentioned in a leading article in *Pravda* which said that the oblast was one which had not yet seriously tackled the question of perestroika. Of course instead of the Partygrad oblast, *Pravda* could just as well have cited any other oblast. Partygrad was chosen in order to discredit, and dismiss, the obkom First Secretary, Zhidkov, who was a Brezhnevite; and to put in his place the Gorbachevite Krutov. Mikhail Sergeyeovich didn't mention the matter either, as he had got his man into Partygrad.

In his Partygrad-for-Lighthouse proposal, Pyotr Stepanovich advanced the following arguments. The oblast was situated in the very depths of Russia and the West considered it the very symbol of the Russian backwoods and provincialism. So when the foreigners came to Partygrad and saw all the features of contemporary urban life, they would be stupefied. Besides, until very recently Partygrad had been closed to foreigners. Now the interdiction would be publicly removed. Floods of foreigners would sweep into this former top secret Soviet town in which rumour had it they made the very latest atomic, chemical, biological and genetic weaponry. This declassification would itself have an additional propagandist effect.

But the main reason why Pyotr Stepanovich had put forward Partygrad was that he hoped to receive a second gold star as Hero of Socialist Labour and that his bust in bronze would be placed on a granite pedestal in Partygrad, his home town. That would add quite a bit to his world fame. Foreigners for sure would point out Suslikov's monument and talk about his career. And, who knows, one day they might change the name of Partygrad to Suslikovgrad?

'We won't put this project on the back-burner,' said Mikhail Sergeyeovich, 'otherwise our conservatives and bureaucrats will ruin our auspicious beginning. If you run into difficulty, come directly to me. To put our seal on this you and I should really celebrate with something more significant than tea. But you know how it is . . .'

'Of course I do, Mikhail Sergeyeovich. We are conquering drunkenness and we shall break down a wall into the West. When all

* Party HQ for the oblast.

that's done, we'll celebrate our historic victory not with tea but something stronger!

Then the two great historic operators took leave of one another. What they subsequently drank by themselves will remain for ever one of history's riddles. But the consequences of this sober meeting of theirs became quite plain to every historian.

THE PROPHEPIC DREAM

Suslikov had a prophetic dream. He had a vision of his native Partygrad. At first he didn't recognize the town. He saw blocks and blocks of skyscrapers made of glass and steel and all the luxurious shop windows. In the sky gigantic electric letters announced SUSLIK-YORK. In the distance where the Statue of Liberty used to stand he could see the monument to Suslikov himself. It was only by the dug-up streets, by the long queues and the drunks lying about the pavements, that Suslikov could recognize the old Partygrad. In the town centre a great hole yawned.

'What's that hole?' asked Suslikov.

'The Big Hole into Europe,' answered an inner voice. 'It's through there that the workers go to the West to get foreign goods.'

'But why go to the West to get foreign goods if they've got all they want in Suslik-York?'

There the goods were indeed in the windows, but not in the shops. After all, it wasn't capitalism they had in Suslik-York but socialism. Besides, our people go West after foreign goods so that none of these goods should be left in the West. Then the Westerners can come to us to ask us to allow them to get their foreign goods in our country.'

'But then the West will close its own frontiers to us and won't give us visas. They haven't gone quite mad there yet!'

The West will try to limit the entry of our nationals. But in reply we can then ask them point-blank: what's happened to your famous democracy? And what about human rights? And then they

would become frightened for their reputation and open the frontiers to us again.'

'But why aren't there any portraits of Gorbachev?'

'They chucked him out.'

'Why was that?'

'Because he opened too narrow a door to the West. Tanks couldn't go through it. The rockets got stuck in it. And then Gorbachushka put a guard on the door who wouldn't allow the wives of other members of the Politburo through. She wanted to keep all the loot for herself. So they all set on their husbands to give Gorbachev the push.'

'But whom did they put in his place?'

'Why, Suslikov, of course. He really *did* make a hole into Europe. He wanted to break down the whole wall, but they prevented him doing that.'

'Why?'

'Because the rotten influence of the West would have swamped us with such force that we couldn't have stopped it.'

'But why stop it?'

'If we didn't stop it, this is what would have happened.'

And with that the mighty knee of the Central Committee of the CPSU gave Suslikov such a blow under his bottom that he flew straight into the hole to the West. And Suslikov-York dissolved into dust.

COMMENTARY

The reader, again, may well doubt the truth of the dream we have just recounted. How, he may ask, do we know that Suslikov saw this or that in a dream? There are at least two reliable sources of evidence. The first is the account given by the dreamer himself. When Suslikov was at Party school he quite often took part in drinking sessions with the intellectual elite of the Central Committee. Usually he was silent, governed by the rule *Keep quiet, you fool, and then you'll seem smarter**. But when he did open his mouth in order to draw attention to his existence, he used to tell everyone

about his dreams. He had nothing else to talk about. The second reliable source of evidence about the dreams of Suslikov (and of those like him) was his speeches. At bottom, they consisted of what the common people were wont to call 'raving nonsense', or, as the Russians say, the delirium of a grey mare. And it may well be asked where *could* such nonsense come from except from rubbishy dreams?

CONFERENCE IN THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE OF THE CPSU

The Partygrad/Lighthouse/Democratization Operation was Suslikov's first large-scale project since he became a CC Secretary. And he intended to make it an example of a new style of thought and action. On the next day he set up the conference.

'In order to implement the measures we are instructed to implement,' said Pyotr Stepanovich, opening the conference, 'we must distinguish between the internal and external aspects. From the point of view of the internal aspect our task consists in converting Parrygrad into a model of perestroika such as will become a lighthouse for all the rest of the country. This means that we must conduct perestroika in such a way that, as a result of it, our communist social order becomes even stronger than before. I think that none of you are exactly novices in the Party and that you understand what I have in mind. It is an open secret that in recent years we have somewhat weakened our political educational work and let go the reins. Every kind of irresponsible person, subject of course to rotten Western influence, has taken advantage of this. Now we have to let these people know that we will not allow the roots of our social organization to be undermined. We can permit much. But there's a limit to everything. Perestroika will succeed when, in the course of it, we are able to strengthen the roots of our society and faith in our ideals.

'From the external political viewpoint,' continued Pyotr Stepanovich, 'our task lies in demonstrating to Western people, by means of concrete examples, the substance and progress of our perestroika. Western people are ideologically and politically

underdeveloped. Their heads are crammed with sex, pornography, violence and the pursuit of profit. One has to spell out everything to them literally with one's fingers.

'Comrades, we have begun to live in a new way. There is nothing that we need to hide. We shouldn't disguise our shortcomings, but we needn't hide our successes either. Let the foreigners take a look at the institutions in which bureaucratism and corruption flourish as well as those ones where traces of the past have already been surmounted. Let them look at a real live bribe-taker. We could show him to them in court. Western people like such spectacles. We will show them that we now have as much freedom of expression as they have. Let them meet whomever they want to meet. And talk to whomever they want to talk to. No holds barred! But we mustn't allow it all to happen haphazardly. We must conduct educational work with our own people so that they are imbued with a spirit of responsibility and show themselves to be politically mature citizens of our socialist society.

'At the present stage of our development' - Comrade Suslikov was coming to the end of his speech - 'friendly relations with the West are extremely important to us. With the West's help we will overcome the temporary difficulties that have arisen faster and better. It is with this aim in mind that we have decided to convert Partygrad into a weapon of our external policy.'

At the conference a special commission was established whose task would be to offer help to the Partygrad administration in the matter of preparing the city and the oblast for their role as a perestroika lighthouse. At the head of the commission they put Comrade Corytov, Suslikov's right-hand man and a man most experienced in the methodology of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. At the same time a conference was being held within the KGB. Comrade Pyzhikov, one of the deputy chairmen of the KGB, began his speech by reciting to his subordinates the current popular parody of Pushkin's epistle to the Decembrists.* 'Believe me, comrade, it will pass, this glasnost thing that you so like, and then the KGB will strike, and you'll end up the biggest ass.

'You see, comrades,' Comrade Pyzhikov drew the moral from

* The Decembrists were the aristocrats who in 1825 staged a liberal revolt against the new tsar Nicholas I.

this joke, 'our people still love and respect us in the old way. But at the same time perestroika obliges us to perfect our methods of work, to exhibit suppleness and to deliberate on our experience in a creative manner.'

At the conference they considered a whole range of subtly inter-connected questions: the structure of Western tourist groups and delegations; the participation of Western spies in them; the infiltration of Soviet people into them; the recruiting of foreigners into the Soviet intelligence service; control over foreigners; the relationship between foreigners and Soviet citizens; help to be given to the Partygrad section of the KGB and militia in terms of personnel, information and technical aid.

A keen discussion broke out on the second question. One half of the conference (the 'liberals') insisted that only half of the foreigners would be Western secret service agents, while the other half (the 'conservatives') held that 100 per cent would be. But when it came to discussion of the third question, the conference was up against a difficulty. Somebody said: 'If we infiltrate our own people into foreign groups in advance in the West, or recruit a foreigner into our spy service, than it would not be correct to say that 100 per cent of the visiting foreigners would be foreign secret service agents.'

'The contradiction is only an apparent one,' ruled Comrade Pyzhikov. 'You are making metaphysical judgements on the principle "either . . . or". But why do you think that because somebody serves in one secret service, he doesn't serve in another? We have to make a dialectical judgement on the matter, as Lenin taught us. That is, on the principle of "either . . . and". Our people can be agents of foreign services. This we will not forbid. We will even recommend it. As for recruiting foreign spies to our side, there's nothing difficult about that. We sometimes even have to beat them off. Comrade Andropov taught us another thing. He said that when the chiefs of foreign secret services turned up at the Lyubyanka to study our past work, we could sleep in peace.'