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*Assassinations of President
John F. Kennedy*

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ON
SOVIET VIEWS OF AMERICA
the Assassinations of
President

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decisions of U. S. "ruling circles." Several of the more avid students of world affairs said the Soviet people were happy that the U. S. at last had a leader who "recognized reality."

The Assassination The news of President Kennedy's assassination unleashed a tremendous outpouring of expressions of goodwill and compassion for the American people from all strata of the Soviet population. Soviet citizens immediately dropped whatever reservations they may have had about Kennedy or his policies. Popular veneration appeared to develop spontaneously, although it also received encouragement from Soviet propaganda. Victorian manners combined with Slavic sentimentality to produce a great outward display of mourning. Visitors to the exhibit failed to understand why Americans did not make a greater external show of grief. "His loss does not seem to mean as much to you Americans as it does to us," several remarked. One group of visitors was so outraged by the fact that one of the guides criticized Kennedy policies and praised Goldwater that they made a "citizens' protest" to the exhibit director, insisting that such behavior be halted as an "insult to Kennedy's memory." Posthumous veneration rose to a peak in mid-December, then gradually tapered off. However, interest in details of the assassination and investigations of both Oswald and Ruby remained high throughout the exhibit's stay in the Soviet Union.

A "Plot" Almost without exception Soviet citizens were convinced that the assassination was not the act of a deranged person working alone but part of a complex and sinister plot. The consensus -- which owed a great deal to the regime's replay of lurid accounts in the Western press -- was that most likely the killing was the work of a fanatic in league with, and in the pay of, a group of ultrarightists. The feeling grew that the world was not being told the whole story. Visitors to the exhibit pressed guides for additional details of the Dallas events, for personal American reactions, for assessments of the assassination's impact on the American public, and for confirmation or rebuttal of late facts and rumors. A number of Soviet citizens advanced bizarre individual variations of the plot thesis, often with considerable heat.

In private conversations with American staff members, Muscovites expressed views similar to those aired at the exhibit,

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"Not one person in the Soviet Union believes that Oswald killed Kennedy unaided," a Moscow University biology student asserted with approving nods from a small circle of friends. "It's so silly to assume that Oswald killed him. How about Ruby? It's obvious that he was tied in with the police," a Moscow film studio scenarist insisted. Another student was sure that "monopolists" had paid for the assassination.

Aftermath

The assassination gave new life to regime-sponsored efforts to denigrate American society in the eyes of Soviet citizens. During December many self-appointed spokesmen for the Soviet people as a whole opened conversations at the exhibit with a token expression of sympathy for the American people's great loss or a phrase in praise of the late president only to launch a vitriolic assault on life in the U.S. These attacks obviously were directed not at their American interlocutors but at all Soviet visitors within earshot.

The two killings also brought to the surface the prevailing popular misgivings about America of varying intensity and persistence. "I sort of lost my faith in America when I heard this," was a view expressed by a number of visitors. "Things just don't happen that way except by arrangement," others set forth in partial justification for espousing a "plot" theory. "How could you have let this happen?," others asked. "The events in Dallas showed us that there was something seriously wrong with America's free society," a Moscow University student privately told a group of exhibit staff members. He also related that Komsomol activists at the University were stressing the thesis that, while Soviet citizens are not as well off materially as Americans, people in the U.S. have to live in constant fear, "like wild beasts in the jungle," as demonstrated by the Dallas events.

Private conversations with several dozen members of the Moscow intelligentsia in December and January showed that they too were caught up in the official line: U.S. political mores are incredibly savage; American law enforcement officials are inept and corrupt; and the American press is kept, irresponsible, inaccurate, lacking in taste, and given to scandalmongering.

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Apparently the belief that President Kennedy's assassination was part of a rightist plot fed apprehension over its possible political ramifications. A Moscow University student insisted that the U.S. would soon be caught up in a return to "McCarthyism." He understood this to mean nationwide political hysteria and the stifling of all criticism. Another typical view was that of an artist who worked in one of the back rooms at the Tretyakov Gallery, "restoring ikons." He was convinced that "reactionaries" had framed Oswald to justify repressive measures against all "progressive" Americans. For the most part, however, Muscovites were unsure in their own minds as to the meaning of the unexpected tragic turn of events and expressed their views in a halting and tentative manner.

Both at the exhibit and in private contacts there was a strong undercurrent of apprehension over what the assassination meant in terms of American policy. This remained high for at least a month after the President's death and dissipated but gradually. "You don't realize how much the policies of the American president affect the daily lives of the Soviet people," an engineer asserted with great feeling. "He was a great man; he could have done a lot for Soviet-American relations," a prosperous looking official concluded after a fifteen minute loud rehash of the whole affair with an exhibit staff member, which engrossed the attention of a wide circle of listeners. A professor of English at Yerevan University was one of the few Soviet citizens encountered who approached the question with anything like an open mind. But he too sought a political explanation. He observed, "Kennedy was young, creative, and energetic in attempting to open up new vistas. He was bound to come up against very strong opposition." Implicit in a number of remarks made by members of the Soviet intelligentsia in private was a feeling that Kennedy's policies and the general improvement in the international atmosphere had made it possible for Khrushchev to permit increased contacts with the West and, generally, to ease up regime controls on the individual Soviet citizen. "We respected him as a person and as a force to be reckoned with," one medium-level Soviet official concluded.

The Johnson
Administration

During December Moscow visitors showed a lively but rather superficial interest in the new president. "What's he like?" "Do you have a picture of Johnson?" many visitors asked. Most of them knew nothing whatsoever of the President's personal or

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political background: "Is he rich too?" "Does he belong to Kennedy's party?" a number asked. In the public give-and-take at the exhibit they were cautious and careful to show only a neutral interest, while in private discussions during December and January their uneasiness over the new administration was pronounced. But they apparently were also receptive to President Johnson's "continuity" pledge.

In Yerevan (mid-February to mid-March) visitors had already made the transition to quiet acceptance of the new administration. An Armenian instructor of automotive mechanics, who had migrated to Yerevan from France in 1947, summed up the mid-March Soviet public reaction to President Johnson as follows:

He seems to be a good man. So far he seems to be following in Kennedy's footsteps, and it's a good thing that Kennedy's policies are to be continued. But we just can't get excited about him.

U. S. - SOVIET RELATIONS

During the period October 1963 - March 1964 the Soviet people seemed genuinely to feel that the most important problem facing their country was to attain the "understanding" -- if not friendship -- of the U.S. Government and the American people. Officially, a limited detente was very much in the air. However, rank and file Soviet citizens in welcoming the signs of an approaching thaw in U.S. - Soviet relations went well beyond the cautious formulas employed by the regime. The exhibit naturally was a focal point of pro-American sentiment, but no appreciable difference in attitude was noted by staff members in their extensive contacts away from the exhibit. Apparently a deep reservoir of popular goodwill for the U. S. and Americans exists despite years of intensive propaganda designed to convince the Soviet people of U. S. aggressive intentions.

Few Soviet citizens appeared to have more than an elementary understanding of postwar issues which divide the two countries. Interest in most international developments seemed superficial. In public discussions with guides, visitors maintained a solid front in support of policies and actions of the Soviet Government, taking for granted that everything the USSR does in the foreign field furthers the cause of peace. In private conversations with American staff

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