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MIKHAIL KLOCHKO

## The Sino-Soviet split— the withdrawal of the specialists

Although the Soviet Union has a penchant for celebrating anniversaries, it showed no inclination in 1970 to mark the withdrawal ten years previously of Soviet specialists from China. Yet this event is one of significance for the relationship between the two countries. Possibly more than any other occurrence it is responsible for the depth of the mutual hostility which from time to time escalates from name-calling to bitter border warfare.

As one of those who was suddenly and surprisingly ordered home in 1960, I can testify that all of the anger at the move was not limited to the Chinese. Without exception my fellow scientists and the other Soviet specialists whom I knew in China were extremely upset at being recalled before the end of our contracts. Like myself, others must have had difficulty hiding their amazement when told by Soviet representatives in Peking that dissatisfaction with our living and working conditions was an important reason for our recall. In fact few of us had ever lived better in our lives than we did in China. Our Chinese hosts were even more mystified; again and again they asked why we were leaving and whether anything could be done to prevent our going.

The suddenness with which events developed indicated that the decision was irreversible. The first telegrams giving us the news arrived in mid-July 1960. By late August the hundreds of scientists, engineers, and technicians who had been scattered throughout China had departed with their families. At the beginning of September not a single Soviet citizen remained in China, apart from diplomats and a few trade officials.

**A Soviet chemist and Stalin prize winner who went to China twice as a member of a Soviet scientific mission, Dr Klochko was granted political asylum in Canada in 1961 and is now a Canadian citizen.**

To this day explanations of what happened in China in 1960 have been few and fragmentary. Indeed, what interested me, on defection to Canada in 1961, was how little of a definite nature seemed to be known about this mass Soviet exodus. One reason for this scarcity of information may be the lack of eyewitnesses who are in a position to talk about the matter. While I cannot be certain of it, I believe I may be the only Soviet specialist in China at that time who is now living in the west.

Rumours started to spread late in 1960. When Edgar Snow asked Premier Chou En-lai about them he was told that the departure of the specialists was due to the expiration of their contracts. Presumably Chou gave this explanation with a straight face. Yet my own contract had five months to run when I got word to go to Peking immediately en route home. At the time I was working in South China in the Kunming Institute of Metallurgy and Ceramics, where I was in charge of one large project and acted as an adviser on others.

My living conditions in Kunming made a farce of the Soviet charge that specialists were not being treated well in China. In the hotel in Kunming I had the unaccustomed luxury of a sitting room as well as a bedroom. Each room had a balcony with a view of a lake, a park, and, in the distance, the mountains. There was plenty to eat and drink and the Chinese scientists from the Institute extended themselves to make my stay with them a pleasant one. Such living standards obviously bore no resemblance to those of the ordinary Chinese people. But from my two sojourns in China — in 1958 and 1960 — I can say they are typical of the treatment the Soviet specialists received.

Most of us were praised and pampered in China as never before in our lives. I remember the feeling of discomfort I had on entering a Peking laboratory for the first time in 1958 and reading on the blackboard the obsequious inscription in Russian: "Welcome to our very dear friend and teacher, Professor Klochko." On the street children ran up to tell us that Russians and Chinese were brothers. In newspapers and magazines and on billboards we read of the "undying friendship of the Chinese and Soviet peoples." There were frequent banquets and receptions at which these sentiments were echoed in toasts and speeches.

But it was the amount of living space we had which made the greatest impression on us all. The size of my room in the Friendship Hotel in Peking, where I first stayed in 1958, was about 250 square feet — more than twice as large as my room in Moscow. No rent was charged for this accommodation which was cleaned daily by two people. As well, my salary of 500 Chinese dollars a month bought twice as much as my Soviet salary did in Moscow. Thousands of Russians must look back today with nostalgia to those good days at the Friendship Hotel. There were some 500 specialists living there when I arrived and when we met in groups the atmosphere was more friendly and informal than ever I had known at home. Russians, I came to realize, relax in direct proportion to their distance from Moscow.

Contrary to the excuses to be given later for the withdrawal, I can recall hearing only one significant complaint from a Russian during my two stays in China. This was from a mine foreman who said he felt a “lack of contact with human beings.” As the only Russian at the mine, and speaking no Chinese, he understandably suffered from loneliness.

If the specialists were treated well in a personal sense, especially in the earlier days of Sino-Soviet co-operation, the working arrangements left room for improvement. The responsibility for this though lay not with the Chinese with whom we worked, but with the régime and its firm commitment to “political content” in all things. It was impossible to prepare a schedule and feel sure that it would be followed. Whatever the institute or academy, there was a good chance that a party meeting called on short notice would make a postponement necessary. Sometimes days on end were consumed by these tiresome gatherings, leaving only the evenings for laboratory work or lectures.

The scientists were often called from their laboratories to work for weeks or months in fields and factories. On one occasion I saw Professor Liang Hsue-Chiang, head of the analytical department of the Peking Institute of Chemistry, marching in a column destined for six to eight weeks of field work in the countryside. If the professors were frequently absent the students also disappeared for

months at a time. Few universities or colleges were open for more than six months of the year. In a country desperately needing the benefits of science, laboratories and libraries were unused and empty much of the time.

(It may seem strange that with science so disorganized, the Chinese succeeded in building the atomic and hydrogen bombs, and in launching an earth satellite in April of 1970. But the techniques involved in these feats are no longer special secrets, and it is likely that the engineers and scientists involved in these activities were excused from agricultural campaigns and even party meetings. As well, the directors of the scientific effort will have been people who received their training abroad, not only in the USSR but also in the United States and other western countries.)

The recall of the Soviet experts was the more keenly felt because Chinese science and technology were in such desperate shape. Not that the experts were all top men in their fields. Overall they appeared to be quite an average lot. Even so, most of them were badly needed. Between 10,000 and 11,000 Soviet experts went to China in the period from 1950 to 1960. It has been said that this was the biggest effort ever by a developed country in aid of an underdeveloped one, but perhaps as many foreigners — chiefly Americans, Britons, and Germans — assisted the USSR in the 1920s and 1930s. According to published Chinese reports there were 1390 specialists working in the country in 250 enterprises when the withdrawal took place.

The abruptness of the withdrawal meant that construction stopped at the sites of scores of new plants and factories while the work at many existing ones was thrown into confusion. Spare parts were no longer available for plants built according to Russian design and mines and electric power stations developed with Russian help were closed down. Planning on new undertakings was abandoned because the Russians simultaneously cancelled contracts for the delivery of plans and equipment. A planned power and irrigation project for the Yellow River, which frequently overflows its banks, was one of those which had to be abandoned.

A study of Soviet foreign trade journals indicates the force of

the blow delivered to the Chinese economy. The value of Soviet exports to China declined from 859,300,000 roubles in 1959 to 210,100,000 roubles in 1962; that of machinery and equipment from 537,800,000 roubles in 1959 to 24,600,000 roubles in 1962. In other words, machinery exports to China in 1962 were only 4.58 per cent of the 1959 figure. India's total trade with China, which was only 14 per cent of the Soviet total in 1959, had surpassed it in 1966. The same is true of the pattern of Chinese trade with Japan and Egypt.

At first the Chinese were scarcely able to believe that the Soviet Union, a fellow communist state, would do such a thing. The matter was treated as a temporary aberration. When I return to Moscow I received letters from China suggesting that my services would be welcome if I could arrange to return. Indeed, it was not until 26 February 1963, when an article appeared in the *People's Daily*, that the Chinese press began to speak openly about what had happened.

Although the withdrawal had not been anticipated by either the Soviet specialists or their Chinese hosts, a cooling in Chinese-Soviet relations had been apparent for some time. For example, when I returned to China in 1960 for my second visit, I was denied the services of the amiable and expert woman translator who had worked with me in 1958. This denial was difficult to understand since she appeared loyally devoted to Mao and all his works. My new translator was not only less expert but more inquisitive. He left no doubt that he made regular reports to the police, and once when he learned that I had gone to a shop near the hotel without him, he let me know in very definite terms that this must never occur again. All of us came to take for granted that our letters would be opened and read. It was a standing joke that the way to get better service in the hotel, or to have repairs made, was to make a complaint in a letter to someone at home. The trouble would usually be corrected at once.

On the Soviet side there was evidence of the same feeling. When I returned to China I was instructed to be on guard against the advances of young Chinese women and not to extend myself in

providing scientific assistance. The programme for my stay had been prepared in advance and I was told to adhere strictly to it and do nothing more. I learned that other specialists had been given similar instructions.

It was clear that the Sino-Soviet honeymoon which had followed the communist takeover in China was no longer sweet. China had no intention of being another Soviet satellite and Moscow deeply resented this attitude.

When the Chinese celebrated the ninetieth anniversary of Lenin's birth on 22 April 1960, they made a point of their disagreement with the Russians on certain matters of ideology. Along with about a dozen other Soviet specialists in Kunming I was invited to a commemorative gathering at which each of us was presented with a handsomely bound book in Russian entitled *Long Live Leninism*. This book was to become famous among China-watchers. It attacked the theory of peaceful coexistence espoused by the Soviet Union, stating that imperialism, exemplified by the United States, had not changed in nature and could only be destroyed through war. (Later the book was to be listed among the Chinese "crimes" which justified the withdrawal of the specialists. I was subsequently questioned by Soviet officials as to whether I possessed a copy and if I had read it.)

*Long Live Leninism* was in a sense Mao Tse-tung's declaration of independence from the Soviet Union. In November 1957, he had stated to an audience of 3000 Chinese students at Moscow University that the socialist camp must have a head and that the USSR was that head. Now he was giving notice that he had changed his mind.

The Chinese embitterment probably dates from the refusal of Khrushchev to make the atomic bomb available to them. Although there was no way to confirm it, I was told in China that as early as 1959 Khrushchev was referred to at closed Chinese Communist party meetings as Enemy Number Two, side by side with President Tito of Yugoslavia. American imperialism was still Enemy Number One.

Then, in June 1960, Sino-Soviet differences emerged at a congress in Bucharest of the Rumanian workers' party. The full

story of this meeting has yet to be told, but there is no doubt that a heated argument took place between Khrushchev and the Chinese delegate, the clever and energetic Peng Chen, then a member of the Chinese Politburo and the mayor of Peking. This was a closed session attended by the representatives of many Communist parties. To those present it must have appeared the ultimate in audacity for Peng to dispute Khrushchev's views. For him to do so before an international communist audience, in effect challenging Soviet leadership of the communist world, approached the incredible. It is easy to imagine Khrushchev's fury at being defied in this fashion. And his ire led, on his return to Moscow, to the "unanimous" decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to withdraw the Soviet specialists from China and curtail technical assistance.

Only the degree of Khrushchev's anger can account for the speed with which this decision was carried out. Scarcely a month after the confrontation in Bucharest, a Soviet note announcing the withdrawal was sent to Peking. My orders to leave reached Kunming on 16 July. After a strong argument at the Soviet embassy in Peking, I was permitted to delay my departure from 8 August to 15 August in order to wind up my work. During this time no one disclosed to me the real reason for my return to the USSR. Instead they maintained the fiction that I was needed in Moscow for important work.

Under instructions from their superiors, the director of the Peking Chemical Institute, Professor Liu Ta-kang, and Madame Lu Chen-yi, a member of the Chinese parliament who worked at the Institute, approached me at my hotel in Peking on 5 August. They read to me the texts of a Soviet note dated 18 July and a Chinese reply. (Later I learned that all of the specialists without exception had the notes read to them.) The Soviet statement made three charges: the Chinese had ignored the technical advice given them — which was obvious nonsense; the Chinese had created an intolerable environment for the specialists, opening their mail and spying on them — a half-truth which ignored the general contentment among the Soviet experts; the Chinese had not provided sufficient protection with the result that there had been physical



attacks on some of the experts — a charge which no one could have credited as containing a kernel of truth. The Chinese reply was moderately worded: the help received was very much appreciated and had been fully paid for; the Chinese had great respect for the Soviet advisers and had made full use of their instructions; the Chinese had done their best to make the lives of the Soviet experts in China as comfortable as possible.

At this stage the Chinese undoubtedly hoped the decision would be reversed. Their bewilderment and concern were brought home to me on the following day when Liu and Madame Lu invited me to a restaurant where we discussed the matter in English after they had dismissed the interpreter. I told them frankly that I could not understand the reasons for the withdrawal and assured them that I would be glad to come back at any time.

About a week later the Soviet ambassador, Stepan V. Chervonenko, summoned all the communist party members among the specialists to a closed meeting in the embassy. In a speech which lasted almost three hours he recounted a long series of "crimes" committed by the Chinese government against Marxism-Leninism and the USSR. He recapitulated the points in the Soviet note regarding the Chinese mistreatment of the specialists. He spoke of the unfavourable impression that Mao's slogan of 1957, "Let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend," had made in the Kremlin. He attacked with special fury the Chinese attempts to disseminate "subversive propaganda" among the Soviet advisers by reading them the two notes relating to the withdrawal and by distributing the book, *Long Live Leninism*. He condemned the Great Leap Forward, the people's communes, and Chinese international policy, including the aggression against India and the wooing of Albania and the new African states.

But the three most terrible crimes committed by China, Chervonenko said, were these: The criticism of the USSR's international policy at a conference of the World Federation of Trade Unions in Peking in June 1960. The criticism by Peng Chen of Khrushchev's speech in Bucharest. And, most heinous of all, China's striving to take upon itself the leadership of the world communist movement and the role of the main promoter of the worldwide

revolution. All these crimes and misdemeanours, said the ambassador, had compelled the Soviet Union to recall its specialists and to curtail its assistance to China. The Soviet leaders hoped that now the Chinese government would decide to correct its mistakes.

In the days before the departure of the specialists, the Chinese displayed none of the alienation which was to come. At a banquet in the main hall of the Palace of People's Representatives we were toasted and thanked. Chen Yi, the foreign minister, spoke for the government and managed to avoid mentioning the reason for our leaving. The responses by Ambassador Chervonenko and another Soviet representative were not as gracious, but there was no open hostility.

On my return to Moscow I was surprised to find that the withdrawal was being treated as a non-event. Officially it was being completely ignored. This was remarkable because every important happening either within or outside the country is usually interpreted or commented upon at least in so-called closed letters which are read at party meetings. This was the case, for example, with the famous de-Stalinization speech which Khrushchev had delivered at an *in camera* meeting of the 20th Congress of the party in February 1956. However, there was no allusion to the withdrawal of the Soviet specialists in any party documents. For more than two years after the event it was known only to the withdrawn specialists, the members of the Central Committee, and perhaps the hundred or so top party bureaucrats. The knowledge reached the public only when the Soviet leaders found it necessary to reply to the open criticisms by the Chinese which started early in 1963.

By that time the Chinese had obviously concluded that the breach could not be healed. Their vituperation brought replies in kind and a war of propaganda was joined. The criticisms in the Chinese press of the Soviet Union for the withdrawal of the specialists have continued in an almost steady stream. A typical reference appeared in an article in the *Peking Review* of 23 May 1969. "During the three years of natural calamities from 1959 to 1961 in China, the perfidious Soviet revisionist clique suddenly stopped its economic and technical assistance to China and withdrew the Soviet experts, causing great losses to China's economy."

Westerners have commonly attributed the rupture of Sino-Soviet relations to a clash of ideological beliefs. This view ignores the fact that ideologies in both Russia and China are evanescent. They change quickly and unexpectedly to suit the whim or convenience of the current dictator or source of power. They may be used as an argument to justify an action that has been taken, but they are seldom if ever the real reason behind it. The "ideological" differences have been no more than a cover for Soviet-Chinese rivalry for control of the communist world. It is the struggle for power, not for the pre-eminence of political and economic ideas, which has divided the two great communist powers.

However, this struggle might not have come into the open until much later had it not been for Khrushchev's withdrawal of the specialists. This act, taken in a fit of pique after Peng Chen's defiance in Bucharest, was a turning point of immense significance. It is interesting that Khrushchev, for all his reputation in the West as a moderating force in international affairs, reacted almost exactly as Stalin had done when he was defied by Marshal Tito of Yugoslavia.

There can be little doubt that Khrushchev's aim was to subordinate China to the Soviet Union, that is, to himself, both economically and politically. He alone bears complete responsibility for the recall of the specialists and the economic sanctions which followed. In various statements the Chinese leaders have made it clear that this is where they place the blame. "Your perfidious act disrupted China's original National Economic Plan," the *People's Daily* declared on one occasion.

Chinese bitterness, when it appeared the withdrawal was final, was inevitable. China had made the mistake of putting all its economic eggs in the Soviet basket, only to have the basket smashed to the ground by Khrushchev.

The Chinese leaders were consequently delighted by Khrushchev's overthrow in 1964. They hastened to congratulate the new Soviet leaders and to express a hope for the normalization of Sino-Soviet relations. In doing so they apparently demanded the restoration of economic and cultural ties to the level of early 1960 and also a public denunciation of Khrushchev's actions in bringing about

the recall and the economic sanctions. While concurring in the first suggestion, the Soviet leaders would not agree to the second. To declare Khrushchev solely responsible for the events of the summer of 1960 would have been an acknowledgment to the world that he had been the personal dictator of the Soviet Union. This was something that the USSR, self-avowed "the most democratic country in the world," could not do.

When the Russians proposed that the problem be placed before a conference of the communist parties, the Chinese refused. They were all too aware that USSR still would be able to command a majority at such a gathering. With the failure of these efforts at conciliation, Sino-Soviet relations began to deteriorate at an increasing rate and the border clashes became more frequent.

Now that China has had time to make adjustments, the extent of the damage done by the 1960 withdrawal may seem a matter for debate. Great as it was, it should not be overestimated. It was probably less injurious than the self-inflicted wounds of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. But a more important and lasting effect of the withdrawal is the moral one. It shook China's faith in the Soviet Union and undermined the latter's authority in the communist world. The results of this act will thus continue to be felt for a long time to come.