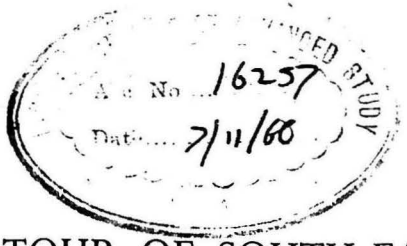

THE RUSSIAN TOUR OF SOUTH-EAST ASIA

By GEORGE EVANS

Mr. George Evans, Special Correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* in South-East Asia, last year covered the recent tour of the Soviet leaders. As it was not possible for Mr. Evans, during his short stay in London, to talk to the Members of the Society as had been hoped, we are indebted to him for permission to publish the following article.

THE ten thousand mile tour of India, Burma and Afghanistan undertaken by Marshal Bulganin, Soviet Prime Minister, and Mr. Krushchev, first secretary of the Communist Party, at the end of last year made history in more ways than one. Not only was it the first Soviet State visit of its kind to Asia but the first to any non-Communist country with the exception of Jugoslavia.

That the travels of the Soviet leaders and their reception, particularly in India, should have aroused the interest they did in the rest of the world is not surprising. The tour was the first real opportunity anyone had had of watching the new order of Soviet diplomacy in action, at any rate at close quarters.

From the moment of their arrival in Asia, Marshal Bulganin and Mr. Khrushchev were represented as doing no more than returning similar visits paid to Russia earlier in the year by Mr. Nehru and U Nu, the Indian and Burmese Prime Ministers. On the face of it this was, of course, the case—though few indeed were the diplomatic observers who were not convinced that the Soviet leaders intended doing a great deal more. In spite of some of Mr. Khrushchev's more painful indiscretions it is now generally agreed that they succeeded—far beyond the expectations of even the most sanguine optimist in the Kremlin.

Viewed in retrospect the Russian arrival in New Delhi on a clear, sunlit afternoon last November, was an event of more than passing historical significance. It marked a new epoch in Soviet-Asiatic relations and, for that matter, in the whole fabric of East-West relations as well. From the outset it was evident that the West viewed the Soviet incursion with considerable misgivings to say the least.

India's reaction was different. Probably no one who had not witnessed the ardour of the masses thronging the beflagged and garlanded streets of Delhi the day the visitors arrived could measure the warmth of their welcome merely by reading about it. It was spontaneous and sincere. In the opinion of many Indians it was also, in some respects at least, over-effusive. Certainly neither effort nor expense was spared to mark the occasion.

State visits, whenever they occur, generally follow a set pattern from which they seldom depart. There can be few recorded instances of such

a violent and rapid departure from the normal by the guests as occurred in this case.

Although Marshal Bulganin and Mr. Khrushchev had been a full three days in India before they launched their first attack on the West—using the Indian Parliament as their forum to the chagrin of many Indians—there were already abundant indications of Mr. Khrushchev's intentions. Indeed, viewing Old Delhi the morning after his arrival he felt moved to shake his head over some of the more splendid architectural creations of the Moghul Emperors and point the moral that they just showed how the people had been exploited then. His appreciation of the marble splendour of the Taj Mahal was clouded by similar reflections.

Thus was the stage set for the extended and strenuous tour of practically the whole of India that followed. In the course of it the Soviet leaders visited numerous industrial and community projects, attended scores of receptions and banquets arranged in their honour and made countless after-dinner speeches. Mr. Khrushchev exchanged pleasantries and banter with politicians and civic leaders at all levels. He imparted technical know-how to engineers, farmers, builders, students, scientists and even astrologists—and scowled at the " paid slave writers of the Capitalist Press " as he later described the Western correspondents who had attached themselves to the tour.

Marshal Bulganin, who was described throughout as " Mr." apparently at his own request, made fewer speeches—and ignored the Press. His greater reserve, urbanity and composure presented him in a more dignified light throughout.

From the beginning it was made clear that neither of the Soviet leaders enjoyed precedence over the other. In fact their efforts to ensure that neither should even appear to be " more equal " in the hierarchy sometimes introduced an element bordering on farce into the proceedings.

The spectacle of two elderly, rather benign-looking gentlemen marching along in step as they reviewed a guard of honour, their hands rising and falling in perfect unison in salute, had possibilities that would have delighted any cartoonist. The same unity of purpose was evident in most of their public appearances and gestures, even down to waving identical straw hats at the crowds from the back of their open car.

The Grand Tour took the Soviet leaders to the Punjab, Bombay, Poona, Bangalore, Ootacamund, Madras, Calcutta, Patna, Jaipur and, at the end, to Kashmir. It was accomplished at breakneck speed in a matter of about a fortnight.

From Bombay onwards Mr. Khrushchev pursued his campaign against " Colonialism " with mounting vigour. Marshal Bulganin, on the other hand, confined himself in the main to the stereotyped sentiments that might have been uttered in the same circumstances by almost any visiting statesman. Compared with Mr. Khrushchev's, his speeches, even those denouncing colonialism, were models of restraint. The most significant of them was an attack on the presence of the Portuguese in Goa.

Before the tour had been very long under way it became evident through the medium of the local Press that Mr. Khrushchev's oratory was creating strong resentment, particularly in London. There is not the slightest

reason for supposing that the two Soviet leaders were unaware of this fact. It did not, however, deflect them from their course.

In considering the tirades directed against Britain by Mr. Khrushchev it is necessary to recall the circumstances in which some of them were made. I think the possibility certainly exists that had he not compromised himself at the start and felt the necessity of recovering lost ground, his subsequent behaviour might have been more restrained.

How, exactly, did Mr. Khrushchev compromise himself, it may be asked? I think the answer is that both the Soviet leaders alienated a considerable section of moderate opinion at the outset of their visit by their misuse of the Indian Parliament as a platform from which to launch an attack on countries friendly to India. The Indian people have a natural courtesy and there is no doubt that many of them felt this to be in bad taste. At the best it was an abuse of hospitality.

It was clearly the cause that led to the appearance of the first breath of criticism of the tour as a whole. It was expressed by a leading political commentator in the *Times of India*, who pointed out the discourtesy to India's friends implicit in the visitors' action.

Mr. Khrushchev's reaction to this was both prompt and characteristic. The day it appeared he made speech at Bombay in which he accused the Western Powers of having started the last war. From then onwards scarcely a day passed without one or other—and sometimes both—the Russian leaders making a fresh contribution to the general disharmony which their speeches had already provoked.

The technical perfection of Russia's latest hydrogen bomb which was dragged in about this time was widely interpreted as another bid to regain lost ground. It was a gesture that could have been construed either as a threat or a promise and in the event it turned out to be a singularly bad psychological blunder to make, in India of all places. Certainly the immediate effect was to release a greater and far more outspoken volume of criticism than any which had gone before. Much of it came from quarters which could be described as anything but pro-Western.

Even Mr. Khrushchev recognised it as deplorably bad strategy. For the remainder of the tour nothing more was said about the bomb. Instead, the theme of colonialism, particularly "British colonialism," was resumed with greater vigour.

It was at this critical juncture of the tour that Mr. Nehru flew to Calcutta to make a significant contribution towards restoring some kind of harmony. The stir which the speeches were creating in London was by then well known to everyone—including Mr. Khrushchev and Marshal Bulganin.

In an extempore addition to his carefully prepared speech Mr. Nehru pointedly spoke of India's lack of hostile feelings towards Britain despite the history of their past relationships. The Soviet leaders heard it with massive and inscrutable solidity of countenance. The next morning, in accordance with their programme, they interrupted their Indian tour to visit Burma.

On their return a week later they paid a two-day visit to Kashmir, apparently at their own request. In the course of this they expressed sup-

port for India's stand on the Kashmir question. The pronouncement not only completed the swing back of public opinion in favour of the Soviet (in shining contrast to the West) but it came as a fitting climax to a hard campaign. The not altogether unjustified suspicion of the outer world was that the sole purpose of the trip by Marshal Bulganin and Mr. Khrushchev to Srinagar had been for no other purpose than to create such an impression.

A sufficient interval has now elapsed since the tour ended to assess its effects with greater accuracy than might have been possible earlier. The first fact that emerges is that it created an enormously good impression throughout India. It also inspired a vast fund of goodwill towards, and interest in, the Soviet Union in places where neither existed before.

Here, after all, were two of the world's most powerful leaders, who not only expressed sympathy with India's aims and aspirations but promised to help her achieve them—from purely disinterested motives, too, and not, like the wicked capitalists and colonial oppressors, because it was desired to gain something in return. The cries "Indians and Russians are brothers" which greeted the Soviet leaders on all sides acquired a new significance. To millions of politically-minded Indians they symbolised a new hope—the hope of ending economic dependence on the West by pointing to an alternative. So I think the answer to the question of whether the tour achieved its main object must be that it did, handsomely, from a Soviet point of view. Marshal Bulganin and Mr. Khrushchev certainly committed some grave errors of political judgment in the course of it but not the least remarkable aspect of their performance was the speed and efficiency with which they retrieved their mistakes.

The pattern of the Russian tour of Burma differed only in detail from its Indian counterpart but its impact was less. I think it would be fair comment to say that, on the whole, the Burmese people accepted their distinguished guests with more detachment than their neighbours. This is not to imply that their welcome was lukewarm which manifestly it was not. It was just not quite so overpowering, which may have been due to the fact that Burma is less well able to afford the prodigality which India displays towards her guests.

In any event, Rangoon's decorations contrasted poorly with those displayed in Delhi, Bombay or Calcutta—which may have cost anything from £20,000 upwards in each place. Burmese crowds, even making allowances for the disparity in populations, were smaller than Indian crowds and they were either less enthusiastic or more restrained.

In Burma, Mr. Khrushchev's attacks on the West changed from being a periodic occurrence to being an everyday one. Several other interesting contrasts were also noticeable. In India, for example, the Soviet police and security bodyguard accompanying the party were seldom evident, so little did they obtrude. They were very much in evidence in Burma from the start. Considering the audacity of the rebel gangs and, more ironically, Communist rebel gangs, in Central Burma which the Soviet leaders visited, this was not perhaps surprising.

A day or so before they arrived in Maymyo, for example, an armed band seized two officials of the World Health Organization in their offices in

broad daylight and carried them off into the jungle. When I arrived in Maymyo, travelling with the heavily armed Russian convoy, the town was being guarded and patrolled by more than a brigade of troops. There were even bren-gunners posted on the roof of the telegraph office.

Burma still bears many of the scars of war. What they saw there in this respect, particularly in Rangoon and Mandalay, provided the Soviet leaders with at least a new setting for an old and somewhat hackneyed plot. Needless to say the causes of the war and its effects on Burma were soon being ascribed to the unprincipled activities of the Capitalists. This, and the old theme of colonial exploitation by the British quickly became staple fare for Burmese audiences.

Because of the uncertain political situation and the very real risk involved, the Soviet travels in Burma were somewhat restricted. Apart from Rangoon, the only other places visited were Mandalay, Taungyyi and Maymyo. So keyed up had Mr. Khrushchev become by this time that he even took the opportunity presented by a pleasure cruise on the Irriwaddy at Mandalay to deliver yet another political oration.

The Burmese end of the tour is, however, noteworthy for one important reason. It marked the first open breach in relations between the Soviet party and the group of British and American correspondents following the tour. This occurred shortly after Mr. Khrushchev's uncomplimentary references to Britain which he made at the Shwe Dagon pagoda in Rangoon. The Soviet correspondents (chiefly from *Pravda* and *Tass*) insisted that Mr. Khrushchev's remarks had been distorted and that he never made them. Mr. Khrushchev himself made no complaints. Indeed, far from retracting a single word, he remarked with complacency the very next night: "Some people didn't like what I said yesterday and they will not like what I am going to say now." Needless to add, what he was going to say then, and did say, was that the English had sat on the necks of the Burmese—and a good deal more in a similar vein.

The people who have since rushed to the defence of Mr. Khrushchev, in Britain and elsewhere, have either not been made aware of incidents of this kind or else they have deliberately chosen to overlook them. My own considered view is that the Soviet leaders were neither misrepresented nor misreported. Their speeches were rendered into plain English, sentence by sentence, as they were made, by two perfectly competent interpreters. The conclusion that they meant every word they uttered is inescapable. It is possible, of course, that they never foresaw the circulation which their sentiments would receive, but that is quite a different matter.

The tour of South-East Asia ended a few days before Christmas in Afghanistan. During their five-day stay there neither Marshal Bulganin nor Mr. Khrushchev left Kabul. As in Burma, their appearance seemed to arouse less popular enthusiasm among the masses than it did in India. Of course neither Burma nor Afghanistan possesses such a large proportion of informed public opinion as India. It is doubtful if more than 50 per cent. of the population in either country even knew that the visit was taking place.

Kabul airport as yet possesses few modern navigational aids. The arrival of the Soviet aerial armada in indifferent weather was an operation

—one imagined, looking at the snow-capped peaks that encircle Kabul—that was not entirely free from an element of risk. However, it was accomplished despite the difficulties, albeit at the second attempt. Afghanistan's large colony of Russian technicians wearing proletarian cloth caps were well to the forefront in the welcoming crowds lining the streets for the ceremonial drive from the airport to the King's Palace.

From the start Mr. Khrushchev's fiery brand of oratory was lacking. Evidently by the time he reached Kabul he had either exhausted his repertoire or else he felt that it was no longer necessary.

Perhaps the highlight of the Soviet leaders' visit to Afghanistan was a Buz Kashi, or goat game, which was specially laid on for their benefit in the national stadium. Buz Kashi, in which two teams of horsemen compete for goals, using the body of a dead goat or calf, can be a spectacle of singular ferocity. Serious injuries to the competitors and their horses frequently occur and fatalities are not unknown. Looking at the two distinguished guests in the Royal box watching this strange game, I could not help wondering what thoughts their expressions of polite interest concealed. The game originated in the Soviet Asian republics but it is not now permitted in Russia at all.

Viewing the tour as a whole I consider that one of its most illuminating aspects was the security precautions apparently deemed necessary to ensure the safety of the Soviet leaders. This side of the operation was entrusted to no less a personality than Army General I. A. Serov, Mr. Beria's successor. Out of the total Soviet party of about 100 who arrived in New Delhi, it was estimated that no fewer than 30 were bodyguards or security men of one category or another.

Neither General Serov nor his aides came into the public eye until they reached Burma. It was there that General Serov, in a heated scene, accused a number of Western correspondents of "stage-managing a lie." The incident occurred on a small, up-country airstrip, where a Soviet policeman intervened to prevent photographers taking pictures of a mine-detector. It is difficult to understand why the Russians should have objected as strongly as they did. Personally I should not have objected in the least—considering that it is not unknown in Burma for planes to get blown up by landing on mines planted on the runways by the Communist rebels.

The fact was, however, that the Soviet party in general, and General Serov in particular, took the strongest exception to it. In a scene of astonishing peurility in which he dropped the illuminating remark: "This couldn't happen in my country," the General engaged in heated argument with a group of correspondents and finally turned his back on them in a very angry frame of mind indeed. Later, Soviet security men walked round the airfield taking pictures of every single Western correspondent there. The correspondents, hastily focussing their cameras, began returning the compliment, and the resulting duel of shutters was watched in utter amazement by the large crowd of Burmese present. Thereafter General Serov had no further contact with the Western Press until he stepped out of his plane at Kabul at the end of the tour. Confronting his astonished gaze there was a group of the same ubiquitous correspondents

—industriously examining the armour of a massive, Soviet-built, bullet-proof limousine, which had been specially imported into Afghanistan for the convenience of the visitors.

Orders were spoken, and a burly Afghan soldier, waving a loaded Sten gun, moved rapidly across and shooed the inquisitive visitors away. Throughout the tour it was isolated incidents of this kind that threw most light on the rigidity of the Soviet official mind. Obviously, as in this case, unfavourable use could be made of any undue tendency on the part of the guests to feel concern for their safety in the host's house. Apart from anything else, General Serov's brief included keeping such unscrupulous performers as the "capitalist slave writers" at arm's length. In this he was not always successful. With the Soviet correspondents, some of whom were Party members of standing, no like difficulty arose, naturally. Their dispatches conformed to pattern. I recall hearing one senior Soviet correspondent admonishing a Western correspondent for what he called misinterpretation and distortion of Mr. Khrushchev's speeches. He wound up by saying: "You should always wait for the official translation of the speech, which is always ready the next day."

Like so many other aspects of the tour, this struck me as being yet another symbol of the vast gulf that has still to be bridged before any sort of understanding between the Soviet Union and the West is possible. In whatever light it is viewed, the Grand Tour can scarcely be said to have brought the prospect of one being achieved much closer.

January, 1956.

CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editor.

DEAR SIR,

I deeply regret that in my note on Sir Ronald Storrs in the last number of the quarterly I gave wrongly the four best books on which he lectured. They were the Bible, Shakespeare, Dante, and Homer. And in that order. He was, too, a great lover of Horace, but he did not consider him one of the supreme four.

Yours truly,
NORMAN BENTWICH.