

February 18, 1953
Indian Ambassador to the Soviet Union K. P. S.
Menon Interview with Stalin

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Summary:

Menon and Stalin meet in Moscow to discuss Indo-Soviet relations. The two speak on issues including India's ethnic makeup and prospects for Indian military and economic development.

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English

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Transcript - English

Interview with Stalin

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Last evening I had the honour of being received by Stalin. At about 4 p.m. I received a telephone call from the Foreign Office saying that the Generalissimo would receive me at 8 p.m. The number of our car and the name of the chauffeur were asked for and given. We were asked to be at the Baravitsky gate of the Kremlin at 7.45 p.m. We were told that an interpreter would be provided but that I was welcome to take someone if I wished. I decided to take my Russian-speaking Secretary, Kaul, with me. We left the embassy soon after 7.30 p.m. Vania, who drove us, was the proudest chauffeur on earth. He was beaming with happiness, and his happiness was complete when he managed a glimpse of Stalin himself. Today, Raya, our Russian teacher, insisted on shaking hands with me—in order, she said, that she might tell her people that she had had the privilege of shaking hands with a man who had shaken hands with Stalin.

At the Baravitsky gate our identity was checked but our identity cards were not asked for. A pilot car was waiting there. Preceded by this car, we entered the spacious courtyard of the Kremlin. At every few yards there was a sentry who saluted smartly. The car came to a halt before a seemingly new building which was apparently Stalin's office. There we were greeted by an officer in uniform, presumably the Commandant of the Kremlin security police, who escorted us into an ante-chamber simply but tastefully furnished and elegantly paneled. Here Pavlov, the interpreter, joined us. He is one of the world's best interpreters and was with Stalin at many of the great wartime conferences.

At the stroke of eight, I was ushered into a room where Stalin, dressed in a Party uniform with a high-necked coat, was standing. He came forward and shook hands with me and led me to his conference table. He sat at one end of the table; and I at the other, facing him. Between us on one side of the table was Pavlov; to Stalin's right was Malik, acting Minister for Foreign Affairs, and to my left, Kaul.

Stalin relaxed in his chair and said: 'Mr. Ambassador, I am at your service.' Evidently, he expected me to open the conversation. I began by expressing my gratitude to him for finding time to receive me. Stalin said that he was glad, very glad, to see me. He added that it was his duty, as Prime Minister, to receive foreign ambassadors. I remembered, however, that during the last five years he has received only three ambassadors.

I then told Stalin that Prime Minister Nehru had asked me to convey his greetings and good wishes for his health. Stalin asked me to communicate his thanks to our Prime Minister and his own greetings and good wishes to him. I said that I had received every courtesy and consideration from the Foreign Office and that I was impressed by the prevailing friendliness towards India. Stalin said that that was only natural: even shepherds in Russia were hospitable, and 'we are no worse than shepherds'. He added that the Soviet people regarded other peoples and races as equal and there was no trace of condescension in their attitude towards them. That was particularly the case towards 'the great people of India'.

Stalin then asked me what was the chief language in India. Was it Urdu or Hindi—or, as he called it, 'Hindu?' Were all the languages derived from the same stock? How did they come to have separate individual developments? In particular, what was the language spoken by the Gujaratis? I gave—I hope—appropriate answers to these questions. Towards the end of our conversation, Stalin reverted to the subject of languages and asked whether it was true that Pakistan had been evolving a language of its own. I said that Urdu had developed as a language of the camp in India but that a number of Persian and Arabic words were now being added to it. 'In that case,' said Stalin, 'It cannot be a real national language.' This, I thought to myself, is the man who recently settled the Marrs controversy on linguistics with one stroke of the pen.

I gave Stalin a brief explanation of our foreign policy, its genesis in our national struggle and in Gandhiji's teachings, and its objectives and methods. As an

illustration, I referred to our repeated efforts to find a settlement in Korea. I recalled our Prime Minister's message to Stalin soon after the Korean war had started and Stalin's reply thereto, our opposition to the crossing of the 38th parallel on the ground that it would extend the theatre of hostilities, our vote against the resolution denouncing China as an aggressor, and our recent efforts in the United Nations to remove the last hurdle to a settlement, namely the dispute over the repatriation of prisoners of war. Our resolution had been put forward of our own accord in our search for peace and we were sorry that its nature had been seriously misunderstood. I hoped that this would provoke Stalin to say something about the Korean resolution, but he remained as unforthcoming as the sphinx, saying merely, and somewhat mechanically, 'Da, Da' (Yes, yes). For aught I knew, he might never have heard of our Korean resolution at all!

Stalin was forthcoming, however, on Formosa. 'We are against the widening of hostilities,' he said. 'So is the Government of India. But in America there are certain people who are bent on widening the conflict because they want more business and greater profits. Not all Americans are like that, but many are. It is no use preaching morals to them, because they are out to accumulate profits even at the cost of blood.' I said that the reactions to recent American moves in the Far East had been adverse throughout the world, including such countries as the United Kingdom and Canada. These reactions would, I thought, have a restraining influence on American policy. 'There is no sign of it yet,' said Stalin dryly. He then went on to say: 'The peasant is a very simple man but a very wise man. When the wolf attacks him, he does not attempt to teach it morals, but tries to kill it. And the wolf knows this and behaves accordingly.' And casting my eye on the pad on which Stalin had been doodling, I found there a number of wolves in various poses.

Stalin inquired whether we had any commercial relations with Japan. I said that these relations were growing. 'Then Japan will undersell you and flood your markets with cheap goods,' said Stalin with a smile. I said that this had certainly happened in the past but we were now wiser.

He then turned his attention to the army. Apologizing for the question, he asked whether India had a sufficiently large army. I said that our army was meant essentially for defense and not for adventures abroad. 'But is your army capable of defending India?' asked Stalin. I said that we had a compact, well-trained and well-disciplined army, but that our air force and navy were still in their infancy. 'It is difficult to defend a country effectively without a powerful air force,' said Stalin.

This led him to ask about India's relations with Pakistan. I said that Kashmir continued to be a stumbling block in the establishment of friendly relations; nevertheless, India and Pakistan had a common international outlook, as was shown in such vital matters as the recognition of China and the refusal to recognize the Bao Dai regime in Viet Nam. Recently, however, there had been reports that Pakistan intended to join the Middle East Defense Organization. We felt that this would be a very unfortunate development. Stalin made no comment but asked whether we had not considered the possibility of some kind of federation between India and Pakistan. 'That would be the ideal solution,' he said. I said that this would take time in view of the bitterness generated between Hindus and Muslims in the closing days of British rule. 'How primitive it is,' interjected Stalin, 'to create a state on the basis of religion!'

Stalin then dilated on the way in which the problem of nationalities had been solved in the Soviet Union. In the old days, he said, the Russians oppressed other nationalities and these other nationalities thereupon came to hate the Russians. He said this with so much emphasis that I thought to myself: here is the Georgian speaking-the Georgian who, as a schoolboy, started his career of political agitation by demanding that Georgian, and not Russian, should be the medium instruction in Georgian schools. The revolution, continued Stalin, marked the end of the period of Russian domination within the subcontinent. Now all nations within the Soviet Union were equal in every respect and this had led to the solidarity and strength of the country.

I thereupon referred to our Prime Minister's own conception of a secular state and his unflinching adherence to it. By upholding this conception, we had been trying to make the fifty million Muslims in India feel that they were Indians in every respect. 'Of course they are Indians,' said Stalin; 'and your policy is just the right one.'

The conversation then ended with an exchange of expressions of goodwill.

I have been trying to co-ordinate my impressions of Stalin. I recall those left by Stalin on some of the few persons to whom he has given interviews. In 1938 Joseph E. Davies, the American ambassador, in an official report to Secretary of State Hull on an interview with Stalin said: 'His demeanor is kindly, his manner almost deprecatingly simple. . . he gave me the impression of being sincerely modest.' In a letter to his daughter Ambassador Davies said: 'His brown eye is exceedingly kind and gentle. A child would like to sit on his knee.' And Winston Churchill stated in Parliament: 'Premier Stalin left upon me an impression of deep, cool wisdom and the absence of illusions . . . a man direct, even blunt, in speech . . . with that saving sense of humour which is of high import'

I myself am impressed by three qualities in Stalin: simplicity, shrewdness and ruthlessness. Everything about him is simple- his dress, his room, his manners, his mode of speech. There is something bucolic in the way he says things; bucolic, too, are the similes he uses-they are of peasants and shepherds. This is the man whose will, more than any other factor, saved Russia for communism and communism for the world: but for him, neither Russia nor communism would have been able to resist the assault of Hitler. This is the man held not only in his own country but by millions all over the world as the 'leader and teacher of all progressive mankind'; whose portraits have taken the place of holy icons in every Russian home; and at the mention of whose name, every audience in Russia rises to its feet with prolonged applause amounting to ovation. Yet adulation has left no more mark on him than does water on a duck's back; there is not a trace of ostentation or affectation about him. When Voltaire returned to Paris after many years in exile, he was greeted by a mammoth crowd of admirers. When a friend asked him whether he was not pleased to be the people's idol, he replied, 'Yes, but an equally large crowd would have turned up if my head appeared on a scaffold.' That is a sentiment which Stalin himself would not hesitate to express.

This leads me to the second quality which impresses me: his shrewdness, which was shown as much by his silence as in his speech. He declined to be drawn into a discussion of our Korean resolution or even of the Korean problem generally. And he declined to comment on Pakistan's participation in the Middle East Defense Organization presumably because his government has not yet decided on its policy towards Pakistan. When we discussed the Far East, Stalin took the opportunity of letting off a vigorous salvo against the greed of capitalists; but on the Pakistan question he seemed more interested in the general subject of the nature of a state based on religion than in Pakistan's present policies. Perhaps he feels that he has come to the stage when he can devote his thoughts exclusively to fundamentals, leaving details to the henchmen whom he has so thoroughly trained.

If I was impressed by Stalin's shrewdness, I was also struck by his ruthlessness. Twice he spoke of the futility of preaching morals to an evil person. Gandhi's phrase, 'a change of heart', would mean nothing to Stalin. Perhaps it was to Gandhi's pre-occupation with moral considerations that Stalin was referring when he drew the metaphor of the peasant's refusal to moralize with the wolf. I telegraphed to my government that this represented the essence of Stalin's philosophy.