

Russia's new ambassador speaks of transition

Weekend Argus 19/12/92 p 22

For the first time in over 100 years, Moscow has sent a representative to South Africa. He probably understands transitional agonies better than most other envoys in Pretoria. He spoke to PETA THORNYCROFT of the Weekend Argus Political Staff

DIPLOMAT with a capital D; trained to be all things to all people — that's the Russian Federation's first ambassador to South Africa, Mr Eugeny Gousarov, 42.

He is a diplomat chosen because he carried no past baggage, no association with Africa. Helsinki and Canada were his previous postings.

Face to face, this former Russian communist from the white cold of Moscow who is now President Boris Yeltsin's senior spokesman in Africa allows himself to be drawn out of the rigmarole of diplomacy.

Russia, the federation of 150 million people, poised regularly on the brink of catastrophe, is in "great financial difficulties, in transition, turmoil" where there are "no established mechanisms and procedures" to follow on the lumbering road to Russian democracy.

And the origins of that change, Mr Eugeny Gousarov says, had more to do with a "leaking iron curtain" than the combined efforts of the furies of Nato and the Warsaw Pact countries. "Information did more to destroy the Berlin Wall ..." he says.

The Russian Federation's first ambassador to South Africa arrived this month. In his first week, he presented his credentials to President FW de Klerk on the Tuesday, made a courtesy call to Nelson Mandela on the Thursday and flew to Botswana on the Friday.

"This time," he says, measuring the depth of his passion, "this time is a very difficult one in the life of our nation. There is much of which we can be proud. The Russian spirit, literature, art, science, education ..."

And regrets? ... "Yes, I did believe in communism. I couldn't have been in the diplomatic service if I hadn't been a communist ... and the foreign service were and are proud of their liberalism at that time, but we can't be Orwellian, to pretend it didn't happen."

Maybe Russians are as fascinated with us as we seem to be with them. They too endured the "very difficult" times of a totalitarian government.

"And the pain of transition. For older people, the change is even more difficult. If you are used to buying bread for 10 cents a loaf, and then within a few months it costs R10, the State pensions, however much they are adjusted upwards, are not enough. Then it's very painful."

And then more than a third of Moscow's 6.5-million people are over 55. And the future is entirely unpredictable with no guarantees after 70 years of certainty.

For Ambassador Gousarov, a graduate of the renowned international school in Moscow, who has lived for the last 20 years at the same address in Gorky Street, it is difficult to remember its new name, Tveiskaya Street, which is what it was called before the Russian revolution.

He is worried about education for his son, Alexander, particularly history. How will it be rewritten? And when? And will the new texts adequately tell the past for without that, says the ambassador, one can't understand the present.

And he says maybe his generation will never be entirely freed of that past, the "social upheaval and the totalitarianism of communism".

The AK47, the most visible export from the Soviet Union to South Africa, is still with us, imported by both sides of the armed conflict, the ANC and the SADF.

The ambassador smiles enigmatically in the fading light of his small Pretoria office. He tells me that Kalishnikov, the inventor of the AK, was interviewed recently in Russia as a professional gun-maker and wept every time he heard that civilians had been killed by his invention of which he was proud.

"We are one of many producers, and make only about 15 percent of AK47's, and do not supply to areas of conflict like Yugoslavia, despite our difficult financial circumstances. Weapons don't kill people, people do."

Of all the diplomats in Pretoria, Ambassador Gousarov probably understands South Africa's transitional agonies better than the others. And apart from the AK47s, maybe it's even more difficult in Russia than here. At least our banks work and there is commerce and trade and exploitation, too.

Which is better, the Ambassador says, than almost no free trade.

"This is a very difficult time, this transition. There is an old Chinese curse: 'May you live during this change.' We have to be a great nation, without violence, it never solves anything ... we want to be part of the democratic club."



□ **HISTORY-MAKER:** Mr Eugeny Gousarov, Russia's first ambassador to South Africa in 100 years.