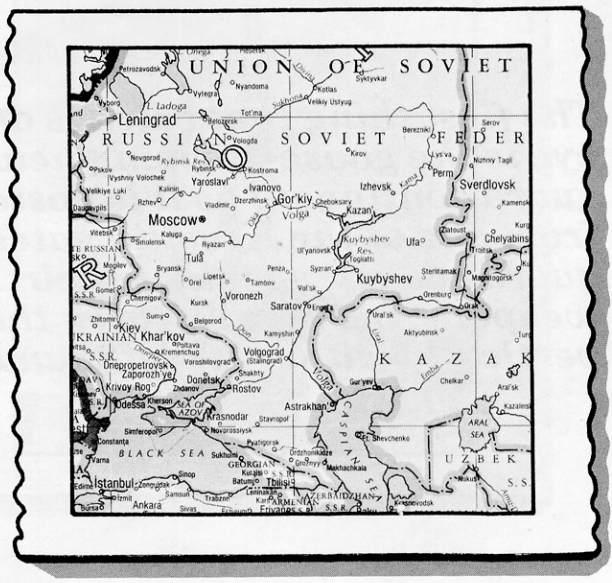
Reflections of the USSR



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by Col. Gordon W. Arbogast

At full power the Aeroflot TU-154 jet hit the Volgograd runway with an unexpected jolt. As the lights that marked the airfield streaked by, the next sensation was that of the Russian plane off of the pavement and on the grass. Fortunately, all cause for anxiety was short-lived as the Soviet pilot quickly regained control and was soon taxiing up to the main terminal. It was late, and the group of visiting Americans from the National War College was about to spend a memorable 24 hours reliving the famous battle of Stalingrad.

The National War College had last sent a group of students to visit Russia in the mid-1970's. It was now the Spring of 1983, and once again a small contingent of National War College students and faculty were making the trip. They were accompanied by the President of the National Defense University, Lt. Gen. John S. Pustay, and five members of the Industrial College of the Armed Forces. As the sole US Army officer on the trip, I recorded some of the more significant highlights of the trip.

Moscow

Our first stop was Moscow. After a long flight from Washington to Frankfurt, we were unexpectedly and abruptly diverted from a Lufthansa flight to a Russian Aeroflot jet that was ready to take off at 1330 hours on an overcast Saturday afternoon. Our first taste of Russia occurred here, and it presaged what lay ahead. A few recollections of that flight include: business-like female cabin attendants in simple blue dresses who were efficient, but kept their distances; food that certainly was ample but tended to be relatively heavy and greasy; white Russian wine and juice of lower quality than we are accustomed to in the West; small seats (especially when you are 6' 6"); and a distinct musky aroma in the cabin. We landed north of the city at an airport that had been built in a rural area for the 1980 Olympic games. It was a large airport, the size of which was accentuated by the small number of passengers being serviced.

Upon landing, we immediately encountered the Russian bureaucracy in the form of customs officials. We were instructed to present our passports to a young Russian soldier (approximately 18 years old) in the terminal. He in turn thoroughly inspected each passport and traveler for several minutes. After he completed this screening, we hoped we could clear customs early enough to allow some time for sight-seeing that evening. However, these plans proved to be short-lived as the Russian customs officials did an extremely tight security check on our baggage, checking virtually everything inside and out; reinforcements were called in to check the few magazine articles and other unclassified literature we had brought along. Soon a total time of two-and-a-half hours had elapsed before we were escorted to our bus. We then began a 35 mile trip into the city.

We were conducted by our female Intourist guide (Larissa) to the Cosmos Hotel, a European built structure used to lodge foreign guests. After room assignments and a full meal of caviar, tasty beef stew and Russian beer, it was after 11 p.m., and our hosts probably expected the group to return to their rooms. Instead, a restless contingent of the group boarded the Metro at a nearby station and headed to Red Square for the midnight changing of the guard at Lenin's tomb.

The changing of the guard is conducted by the Red Army at Lenin's tomb on the hour. It is particularly impressive in the crisp night air while red stars light up the dark sky over the Kremlin walls. The first thing that catches one's eye is the goose-stepping new guard contingent as it is posted from one of the Kremlin gates. The guards do not shoulder their weapons, but rigidly carry them vertically with their left hands. All of the guards appeared to be of European Russian stock — minority Soviet soldiers (Georgians, Armenians and so on) were singularly absent.

Other highlights in Moscow included visits inside the Kremlin, Lenin's tomb, the Exhibition for Economic Achievement, the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall, the US Embassy and the Institute of U.S.A. and Canada. The latter was the most interesting and professionally rewarding experience of the entire trip. For an entire morning the group discussed current US-USSR affairs with the Director (Georgi Arbatov) and his staff. The Institute does not have a direct US counterpart, but it reportedly has great influence in the USSR; its role is to provide the Kremlin leadership with advice on relationships with

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the US. It was mentioned that a job in the Institute is very prestigious. All discussions were conducted in a very frank manner and focused heavily on current problems in INF and other strategic issues. The next evening Mr. Arbatov and his son joined the group for a reception held by our US ambassador to the Soviet Union (Arthur Hartman). At this well-planned reception there were a number of foreign military attaches accredited to the USSR including generals from many countries. There were general officers form the UK, France, India, Pakistan, Argentina and the PRC. The Ambassador's residence offered a major change from the drab US Embassy that we had visited earlier in the day. The residence was formerly the luxurious home of a pre-revolutionary merchant that was built around 1911. The mood of the reception was definitely up-beat, despite the harsh rhetoric being exchanged at the time by high officials from both of the superpowers.

The attitude of the typical Moscovite appeared to be considerably less sanguine than that encountered in the elite class. Long faces were the norm among the common people, especially the middle-age and older classes. Younger people appeared less somber, particularly when accompanied by a member of the opposite sex. The divorce rate in Moscow was cited as over 50% and climbing. Of the total number of divorces, more than 50% are being initiated by women — a relatively new development and an indication that women's lib has not been altogether confined to the West.

On unofficial side excursions, the group visited an occasional free enterprise market which the authorities allow to exist. At these markets, mainly women have traveled to Moscow from the farm to sell fruit, vegetables, and other staples for extra rubles. Prices were high at a market near the Riga Train Station. Dried apricots were selling for about $3.50 a pound and one poor grade apple brought 50 kopeks (around 80 cents). In a nearby meat market, chicken was around $3.00 a pound. Other meats were relatively inexpensive, available in quantity, but tended on the fatty side. In consumer goods stores, there appeared to be adequate clothing albeit of low quality. Shoes were especially poor quality, and large queues tended to form when shipments of higher quality shoes arrived for sale. Sports equipment appeared to be mainly imported (we saw tennis rackets from India) and was also of poor quality.

By Western standards Moscow appeared to be a busy town, but it lacked excitement. The Military were especially in evidence as soldiers wear their uniforms seven days a week; this even includes evenings if they decide to go out to the theater or to a restaurant. The elite communist leaders appeared to be enjoying their status and an obvious double standard existed. In most cases, they were all attired in western business suits in contrast to the ordinary Soviet citizen. The command of the English language (and especially US slang) was remarkable. In several cases at the Institute, a few Russian officials appeared to be more American in dress and language than group members. Also of note was the ease with which we were able to travel around the city on their extremely clean and efficient subway system. We were not directly harassed in our travels, although an occasional Russian citizen took umbrage at some group member's reaction to the poor consumer goods in the stores. Also evident was a heavy anti-US propaganda that appeared in Pravda, book stores and at public reading locations. Most of this was directed against US national authorities, worldwide policies (support for Israel, for example) and to the military establishment.

Baku

To gain an appreciation of Russian life in other republics, the group next traveled south to the major city in the republic of Axerbaijan — Baku. Notwithstanding an action-packed full power landing in Baku, my first memory of Baku is of jogging in the warm, dry weather along the Caspian Sea. This is in sharp contrast to our morning running in the cold and occasionally snowy mornings among the white birch woods in Moscow.

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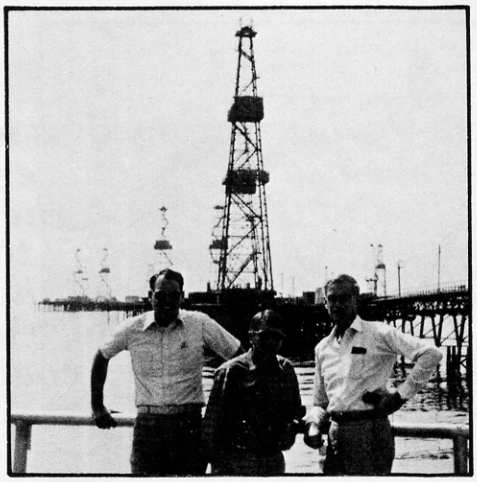

Azerbaijan borders on Iran and has a rapidly growing Moslem population. Recently, Andropov appointed Aliyev a new member of the Politburo from Azerbaijan, a move which has not gone unnoticed in the predominantly White Russian and Ukrainian KGB and Soviet military.

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Also in Baku the group was able to view a traveling circus, a local mosque, museums, and a local wedding. The latter was an impromptu experience as the group requested that the bus be stopped as the bridal couple was departing the wedding ceremony. The first destination for the couple was the traditional one for most Soviet newlyweds — the local war memorial to lay a wreath. In their case, it was the Memorial to the 26 Baku Commissars. The Commissars had been young communists who had been summarily executed by the Whites in the Russian Civil War.

The people in Baku appeared much more relaxed than they had in Moscow, although local officials appeared to be much more concerned with keeping tabs on us than had their Moscow counterparts. It was during our stay in Baku that the Subbotnik occurred — the semiannual Saturday in the year in which all Soviets were supposed to donate free labor to the State. Although it was observed in Baku, there was an obvious lack of enthusiasm and many people appeared delinquent.

The museum of history was very interesting in that worldwide events were seen totally from a Russian perspective. For example: the entire Pacific war in World War II was represented by one picture of a Russian General Officer taking the surrender of the Japanese while General McArthur was standing in the background. There was also a heavy focus on a recurring theme; the frequent invasion by foreigners into Russian territory. In the case of Azerbaijan, battles through the centuries were depicted with Iranians, Mongols, and Turks. As a crossroads to China, it was mentioned that Marco Polo had passed through this area on the way to Cathay. An old inn still exists from those days, the Karavan Sarai. The only problem with the inn is that the food apparently has not improved much over the years; several of us became ill the next day after an evening meal there. (Did Marco Polo invent Lomotil?)

The former city of Stalingrad was certainly unique in this trip. Because I am a career officer, this stop stands out as probably the most memorable, although it was the shortest. We toured Volgograd the same way that professional military personnel tour Gettysburg or Yorktown — strictly from a military perspective.

Our day in the "Hero City," as the Russians are fond of calling it, was a full one. We started by reviewing the battle: the German advance in July 1942 through the city to within a few hundred yards of the Volga; the bitter house-to-house fighting represented by the only structure still standing from the battle — the Old Mill; the reinforcing Russian field armies which encircled and cut off General Paulus in the winter of 1942; the unbelievable epic struggle for Mamaef Hill, the terrain that dominates the entire city; and finally the surrender of the newly promoted Field Marshal Paulus.

The Russians have spent a considerable sum of money and effort creating a national battlefield at Volgograd. On the top of Mamet Hill, there now stands the largest free standing statue in the world representing Mother Russia's victory over the invaders. This awesome statue of Mother Russia looms large over the city and is particularly inspiring when viewed from the Volga River. Nearby are statues and battle scenes that have been hewn out of the indigenous rock by men who actually fought in the battle. Inside a large chamber in the hill, the Soviet Army stands guard over an eternal flame, while on the surrounding walls the names and ranks of thousands of

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Russian soldiers are engraved. On the day we were there, hundreds of school children and other Russians had journied to pay their respect to their countrymen who had turned the tide on the Eastern Front and ultimately cost Hitler 1.5 million of his best troops. At the base of the hill in the city, young Russian Pioneers mimic the soldiers by standing guard at their own eternal flame.

Near the Old Mill the Russians have also erected a magnificent panorama of the battle. This depicts the crucial point in the battle in January 1942 as seen from Mamaef Hill. This 360 degree painting is richly augmented with bunkers, barbed wire, and real-life models of Russians and Germans in hand-to-hand mortal combat. Shortly after returning to the States, I visited the Cyclorama of Pickett's charge at Gettysburg to form a comparison. While the Cyclorama is certainly very impressive, there really is no basis for equating the two. The panorama is certainly much better, especially in realistic details (although a few of the scenes appeared hyperbolic: a badly wounded Russian signal officer saves the day with his last breath as he splices field wire together with his teeth). Actual rare Russian footage of the battle together with an English narration was another real treat. By the end of the day our local guide, Svetlana, had impressed us with a first-class guided tour of a very special place for the Russian people.

Leningrad

The last stop on the trip was to the nation's second most important city — Leningrad. Due to its importance as the former home of the Tsars, this city was by far the most interesting from a historical and cultural point of view. Our local guide must have reiterated a hundred times to please pay attention to your right where you will see the Tsar's personal design on (this or that bridge, gate and so on).

Leningrad was laid siege to by the Germans in World War II, and 1 million of its 3 million inhabitants perished. Although many of the city's tourist attractions had been damaged, the Russians have obviously taken great pains to restore their beauty. As had been the case in Moscow, a lack of apartment housing is still a major problem, and the Russians do not expect the situation to ameliorate until the 1990's. Despite an ambitious construction schedule, many apartments contain three generations of the family all living together. Perhaps this is why the people appeared so somber in these two cities.

Our trips to the Winter Palace and to Peter the Great's summer palace nearby were most enjoyable. Part of the Winter Palace is called the Hermitage, and it is the repository of many of the world's most famous art and sculpture. Comparable to the Louve in Paris, the Hermitage contained works by Italian masters (DaVinci, Michaelangelo), as well as great Dutch painters (Rubens, Rembrandt), Neoclassical, French Impressionists (Cezanne, VanGogh), Cubists (Picasso), Post-Impressionists and so on. Also in the Hermitage was a splendid room commemorating the victory over Napoleon. It featured a huge portrait of Tsar Alexander I and portraits of over 300 Russian Generals who fought in the campaign. At Peter's summer palace, we put slippers on over our shoes to protect the wooden inlaid floors and the rich designs. Large paintings depicting Peter's victories over the Swedes (e.g. Poltava) and Catherine's sea victories over the Turks were very much in prominence.

During the evening we shopped at the local markets with our dwindling supply of rubbles. As rubbles cannot be removed from the country, we all tried to exhaust our supplies. Actually, we made most of our purchases at the hard currency (Beriozka) stores that seemed to abound near our hotel. We also saw a Russian opera, Dead Souls, by Nikolai Gogol. This opera had as its theme the corruption and insensitivity of the Russian upper classes to the plight of the Russian people in the 19th century.

Of course, our Russian hosts lost little opportunity to expose us to their political ideas. Communist literature in English was often to be found laying around airport and other waiting areas. Lenin is unique in current Russian society and was treated as a semi-diety. The proliferation of Lenin statues in every city is unbelievable and appeared artificial and grotesque at times. No other former leader is even a close number two. It was as if Lenin were the integration of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Jesus Christ.

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Lapel pins were worn by virtually everyone featuring different Lenin poses; there were baby Lenins, sternly visaged Lenins, kindly Lenins, etc.

After some reflection, it probably should not have come as such a surprise that Lenin held such immense stature. He really is the only authentic Soviet hero who never fell into disfavor or disrepute. Marx was German and never foresaw that the world revolution would start in Russia. Trotsky, Stalin, and Khruschev all fell from grace during or after their lives. In fact, Khruschev was not even afforded the honor of being buried by the Kremlin wall; instead he is interred in the New Maiden's Convent in Moscow. Only Lenin died "with his boots on" leaving behind a lasting legacy; indeed it constitutes the ideological and political cement on which the Soviet regime still rests. It was his theories on capitalism and imperialism that provided the ideological bridge between Marx's economic theories about capitalist exploitation and the reality that communism stood the best chance in the underdeveloped world. Revolutionaries in Central America continue to draw sustenance from his ideas, and his example in implementing them. His second, monstrous contribution may have been even more significant than any of his ideas —the concept and implementation of a revolutionary vanguard, entitled to consolidate all power and make decisions on behalf of the masses, all in the name of serving the masses by virtue of their superior understanding of the forces of history. In one neat stroke, he had rationalized dictatorship in the name of the people and had anointed a chosen few to become the new leadership class. Thus, it should not be surprising that Lenin is so revered by the Party. In fact, the entire communist party apparatus owes to Lenin their privileges and their protection against the popular impulses toward democracy. Finally, Lenin had the good sense to die soon after the revolution had been won, but before the Soviets had to make the fateful decisions on how communism really should be translated in terms of running the economy and dealing with the bourgeois classes like the Kulaks. These tough nuts were left for his successors, and it is no wonder that they are not wearing Stalin nor Beria pins today.

Besides the near-universal proliferation of Lenin pins, many older Russians wore their World War II battle ribbons on their civilian tunics. Book stores were overflowing with World War II material — books, cards, posters and other memorabilia. It was as if World War II had ended last month. Unfortunately, some rather blatant anti-US propaganda posters were also found in some bookstores. These depicted such scenes as Uncle Sam with his hands dripping blood in El Salvador and in the Middle East.

At the Peter and Paul fortress, we viewed the tombs of the Tsars and the prison cells where political prisoners were incarcerated, including Lenin's brother before he was executed. A visit to the picturesque Saint Isaac's Cathedral brought to mind Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. This truly magnificent cathedral had beautiful, ornate tapestries and impressive biblical scenes depicted on the ceilings. Many of the marble columns had been chipped away by German artillery in the war and had not been restored as a reminder to all of the horror of the siege.

A visit to the Consul General in Leningrad (William Shinn) wrapped up a very busy three days in Leningrad. He gave us an excellent overview of the city from both a political and cultural point of view. For example, he advised that the First Secretary of Leningrad (Romanov) was also a rising power in point of view. Shortly after returning to the US, Romanov was appointed to the Politburo in Moscow.

Our two week journey ended shortly thereafter, and we departed Leningrad via the Finland Station on the way to Helsinki. This was the same route taken by Lenin when he was allowed to return to Russia in 1917 by the Germans. Our last memory of Russia was similar to one of our first — another tough customs inspection. We had all purchased a number of Russian goods (shapkas, samovars, icon prints, black lacquered boxes) and had carefully packed these items at the hotel before departing. By the time the government officials had concluded their thorough two hour search, our luggage was a disorganized mess. Several items were broken by the rough handling of the inspectors. Our faculty trip leader and outstanding linguist, Lt. Col. Bob Berls (USAF) had

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the misfortune to sit next to a Russian and a Finn who were both guzzling vodka during the entire trip. He was unceremoniously conducted out of the USSR while both men proved that vodka can be a strong emetic when taken on a train.

Final reflections

Two weeks is certainly insufficient time to form opinions of a nation as large and complex as the USSR. Yet, there are a number of impressions that I did form based on this experience. First, the elite and the common people seem to agree on one thing -- they are both envious of the wealth of the West. They seem to feel that their superpower status ought to qualify them for a share of the good things that the US, English, West Germans and other Western nations have garnered to themselves for sometime. The elite ruling class has acquired some of that wealth through means which the Chinese communists have termed revisionist in the past. However, the large gap with the West results in a psychological complex with differing degrees of frustration for the various elements of Russian society. Secondly, most Russians think that we have a distorted view of them and that their World War II suffering and subsequent contribution to the Allied cause has been unappreciated in the West. Russians cannot understand why they are not more welcomed in the West. As mentioned, Russians are deeply attached to the past, especially the "Great Patriotic War." They are extremely insecure as a result of the losses sustained in that war and a tradition of invasions by Monguls, the French, Swedes, Turks. These points came up repeatedly in conversations with various Russians. Viewed in this light, the United States with its military strategic might is viewed as the most recent successor to previous threats. Thirdly, many Russians greatly respect American ingenuity, resourcefulness, and individualism. The taming of the American West is often compared to the rugged task of conquering the hostile Siberian wilderness. Lastly, I had the distinct impression that US military power is highly regarded. Repeated references to our strong Navy and Air Force were heard; the Army is also respected, but not to the same extent probably due to their relative advantage in force correlation. The Pershing II/Cruise Missile issue in Europe was of paramount interest to them, and they argued their side of this controversial issue with much intensity.

Although the number of American visitors to Russia has sharply declined in recent years, it is obvious that the United States must expend a greater national effort to understand and deal with this large, powerful nation.

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