

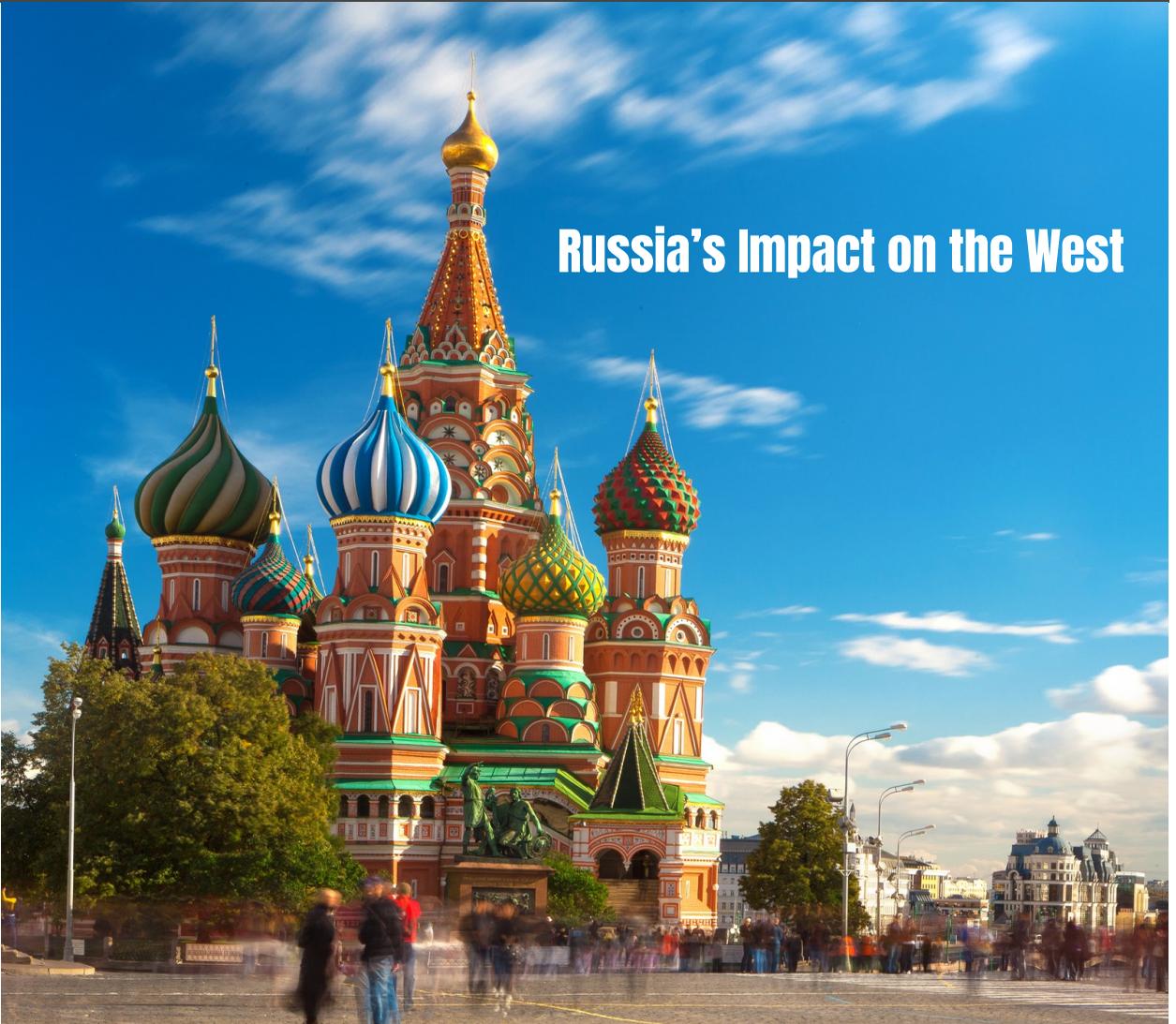
Fall 2021

DIALOGOS

(Greek: To See Through to Meaning)

A Magazine of the Institute for the Study of Western Civilization

Russia's Impact on the West



MISSION: To improve our understanding of how we came to be who we are, why we think the way we do and what assumptions about the world and human nature trace back to earlier periods in the 5,000 years of Western civilization.

From the Editor Why Russia?

By Michele McCarthy

This entire issue of *DIALOGOS* is devoted to the subject of Russia and its place in Western civilization. This fall, for the first time ever, our founder and director Dr. William Fredlund is offering a complete academic year's study on the history of Russia. What relevance does Russian history have to the West? In many respects, Russia seems to be on the fringe of our collective consciousness about Western civilization.

This issue attempts to explain the importance of Russia to understanding the West's place in the world. Bruce Thompson's excellent article, "Two Paths Diverged: Russia and the West," briefly traces Russia's emergence on the world stage and what driving forces created the Russia we know today. How surprising (and ironic) that the opportunity for a free university education in the late 19th century was the precursor to the revolution of the early 20th. He touches on how Russia's artists have made enormous contributions to our culture that are revered throughout the West; yet often at great personal peril to themselves.

Eno Schmidt's review of the book *Moscow, December 25, 1991* examines the inflection point in current memory when everything changed. Though they were sometimes antagonists, Gorbachav and Yeltsin ultimately shepherded Russia into a new era. But not

before some members of the military and Communist Party attempted a coup in August of that year to prevent that from occurring.

Which brings us to our last article.

Sharon Martin happened to choose that very month for an extended holiday in Russia! She has written a first-person account of her time there.

We hope you enjoy this issue and come away with some ideas of your own regarding the question I first posed: What relevance does Russian history have to the West?

РОССИЯ
СПЕЦИАЛЬНЫЙ ВЫПУСК

К ГРАЖДАНАМ РОССИИ

В ночь с 18 на 19 августа 1991 года отстранен от власти законно избранный Президент страны. Какими бы причинами ни оправдывались, это отстранение, мы несомненно считаем, является нарушением конституционных принципов демократического процесса в стране и представляет все более острый характер. Народы России становятся хозяевами своей судьбы. Существенно ограничены бесконтрольные права исполнительных органов, включая партийные. Руководство России должно решительно придерживаться Союзного Договора, стремиться к единству Советского Союза, министру России. Наша задача по этому поводу позитивно существовать ускорить подготовку Союзного Договора, согласовать его со всеми республиками и определить дату его подписания - 20 августа с.г.

Такое развитие является единственно разумным с учетом как бы безальтернативности, единственности и неотвратимости решения проблемы существующих в настоящее время миром, и не имеет под собой никаких оснований и законных оснований для своего осуществления. Ранее это представляло собой политическую альтернативу.

Мы считаем и считаем, что основные моменты неуместны. Они дискредитируют СССР перед всем миром, и не имеют под собой никаких оснований и законных оснований для своего осуществления и в отношении Советского Союза, и мирового сообщества.

Все это заставляет нас объявить незаконным привлечение к власти так называемый комитет, ответственный объявляет незаконными все решения и распоряжения этого так называемого комитета.

Уверены, органы местной власти будут незамедлительно способствовать конституционным Законам и Указам Президента РСФСР.

Президенту и гражданам России дана дерзкая просьба и требование вернуть страну к нормальному конституционному развитию.

Возвращение незаконно объявленности Президенту страны ГОРБАЧЕВУ наступить не должно. Требуется незамедлительно созвать Чрезвычайный Съезд народных депутатов СССР.

Мы благодарим вас за участие в этом деле. Обращаемся к военнослужащим с призывом проявить высокую гражданскую ответственность и не принимать участия в расстреливании мирных граждан.

Не сомневайтесь, наши требования обязательно выполнят! Мы уверены, что мирные граждане страны проявят высокую гражданскую ответственность и не примут участия в расстреливании мирных граждан.

Президент РСФСР
Президент СССР Горбачев
И.С. Прохоровичев
Ведомство Советов РСФСР

В.Е. ЯELTSIN
Л.С. ШИВАЛОВ
Т.С. ШИВАЛОВ

*Boris Yeltzin's flyer of August 1991
calling for a general strike
(English translation on back cover)*

From the Director

Our brand new History of Russia class starts on October 6! This will be an adventure for all of us, solving what Winston Churchill called "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." We're going to have such fun! The in-person seats are going fast, so don't miss out! Прийти! (Come!)

—William Fredlund, PhD

Letters to the Editor

A Possible Mistake? (*Summer 2021 issue*)

“Dr. Bill observes in his essay on education, ‘The Battle for the Young Mind,’ that ‘Socrates may yet win another battle for honest debate.’ Yet he is not otherwise mentioned in the essay. However, the similarly named Isocrates is credited as a founding father of classical education, given his early use of the liberal arts curriculum. That being the case, it seems that Isocrates, not Socrates, should have been mentioned in the final paragraph of the essay and in the break-out quote.” —*Jim Pintner*

Dr. Bill responds: “Yes, you are right. Socrates and Isocrates should have been explained. They are two different people, and my quick aside needed more information. I am 100 percent in accord.”



Got Opinions?

Have you read anything in *DIALOGOS* you'd like to comment on? Send your thoughts to Michele McCarthy:

MicheleAnnMcCarthy@gmail.com

Submissions may be edited for length based on space available.

DIALOGOS is published quarterly by the Institute for the Study of Western Civilization for our teacher scholars, members, and students.

Editor: Michele McCarthy

Contributors: Sharon Martin, Eno Schmidt, Bruce Thompson

Director: William Fredlund, PhD

Who's Who at the Institute

Joan Niemeier

The Institute's CFO, **JOAN NIEMEIER**, first noticed the advertisements for Dr. Fredlund's classes sometime around the calendar event known as Y2K. She was working long hours in the finance department of a dot-com startup that was soon to crash. In an effort to retain her sanity and nourish her love for art and literature, Joan decided to try out one of Dr. Bill's individual lectures. The “test” lecture was about Michelangelo, and Dr. Bill passed the test. Joan enrolled in the *The Making of the Western Mind* in January 2001 for the quarter on the Italian Renaissance. And she kept on enrolling.



Not quite a California native, Joan came to the Bay Area at six months and lived in Alameda before her family settled in the beautiful hills of Mission San Jose (eventually a part of Fremont). She commuted from there to Notre Dame High School in downtown San Jose. After moving to San Jose she twice attended SJSU, earning degrees in art and business. Working for local CPA firms on the Peninsula and San Francisco, Joan earned her CPA certificate and started her own small tax practice. She also dabbled briefly in the aforementioned corporate world. In 2004 she started doing part-time work at the Institute and developed lasting friendships with many students in class and on the phone. Now “semi-retired,” Joan lives with her husband Charles (and countless deer, quail, and squirrels) in an unincorporated corner of San Mateo County. Joan and Charles are most proud of their daughter, son-in-law, and two grandchildren who live in Mountain View, and of their son and his girlfriend who live in Boston, MA.

Feature Article

Two Paths Diverged: Russia and the West

By Bruce Thompson, PhD, professor of history at the University of California Santa Cruz

W

hy is a Russian history class at the Institute for the Study of Western Civilization? Isn't most of Russia, geographically, part of Asia? Didn't the Greek Orthodox version of Christianity that Russia embraced give rise to a very different kind of civilization from that of the Latin Christian West with consequences that are with us to this day? Isn't it true that huge numbers of Russians, not least among them their current leader, harbor hostile feelings of resentment toward the allegedly arrogant and effete West even now, in the third decade of the 21st century?

Yes, yes, and yes. And yet.... The Russian contribution to Western civilization has been extraordinary and multifaceted, just as the influence of Western culture on Russia has been profound and undeniable. As fraught with tension and mutual distrust as it has been, the ambivalent relationship between Russia and the West is one of the most important themes in the history of what we call

Western civilization, as Professor William Fredlund will demonstrate in a year-long course on Russian history starting this fall.

The Russian Empire

Historically, Russia's geographic location and topography have exposed the country to foreign invasions, but at the same time offered abundant opportunities for territorial expansion. The result by the 19th century was an empire that covered one-sixth of the world's land surface, an area as large as the face of the moon.

During the 13th and 14th centuries, the development of Russian civilization had been arrested and threatened with extinction by an incursion of fierce nomadic warriors—the Mongols—from the east. The center of gravity of Russian civilization shifted from Kiev, which had a western orientation, to Moscow which was much further to the north and east. Meanwhile the Western world was rediscovering the legacy of classical antiquity. As the historian E. H. Carr observed, “Eastern Christendom, clinging to Old

Slavonic instead of Latin as its ritual language, remained immune from the Greek discovery of the supremacy of reason and the Roman invention of the rule of law. The ideal of the independent and self-sufficient individual, which flowered in the

In other words,
Russia missed
the Renaissance.

upon the performance of services for them, in return for which they gave their nobles absolute control of the disenfranchised serfs who were by far the majority of the population. The result was a nobility that lacked both financial and political skills, ruling over a peasantry that was rooted to the soil, deprived of political rights, and subject to corporal punishment. It was easier for the Russian gentry to vegetate in the provinces with a huge supply of non-free labor than to attempt to improve their estates or to challenge the authority of the government, especially when those who dared to do so were severely punished. The figure of the “superfluous man”—an idle, depressed, and indebted member of the provincial gentry—is a common theme in 19th-century Russian literature.

If the nobility lacked the skills and drive to become a responsible political class, the middle classes lacked the critical mass to do so. The backwardness of Russian commerce and the absence of a sizable, aggressive middle class meant that Russia lacked the pools of capital, the commercial and financial expertise, and the political ballast provided by middle classes elsewhere. A weak middle class meant a weak liberal tradition. The construction of railroads and the onset of industrialization in the second half of the 19th century depended to a considerable extent on foreign capital and expertise and on Jewish entrepreneurs who became the targets of anti-Semitism.

As for the peasants who were the vast majority of the population, there is a bleak description of them

in a story from 1897 (more than 35 years after the end of serfdom in 1861) by the great writer Anton Chekhov: “These people lived worse than cattle, and it was terrible to be with them; they were coarse, dishonest, dirty, and drunken; they did not live at peace with one another but quarreled continually, because they feared, suspected, and despised each other.”

The Russian Intelligentsia

In the 19th century then, Russia was an underdeveloped society with a feckless nobility, a weak middle class, and a brutalized peasantry. But as part of its effort to catch up with the West after Russia’s humiliating defeat in the Crimean War, the regime opened up admission to the universities to anyone who could pass an entrance examination. Tuition was free and there were scholarships for those who could not afford to pay room and board. The Russian student population nearly doubled in the six years that followed the sanctioning of unlimited enrollment in 1855. No sharp social distinctions existed as there were at Oxford and Cambridge, no fraternities as there were in the German universities. Here young sons of the nobility rubbed shoulders with the *raznochintsy*, young “men of various ranks” from the lesser professional and bureaucratic classes.

Western socialist thought took on a pronounced messianic streak that ultimately derived from the old national myth of “Holy Russia” as the bearer of true Christianity.

In a country where 90 percent of the population was illiterate, a university education was an extraordinary thing. In the 1860’s, there were only 4500 university students (in any given year) in a population of 75 million. The “intelligentsia”



Anna Akhmatova by Natan Altman (1914)

emerged from this small group, acutely conscious of its isolation from the mass of the people. For them, socialism was both a substitute for the religious faith many of the young intellectuals had lost and a recipe for overcoming the great cleavage in Russian society between the privileged elite and the oppressed masses. All the varieties of Western socialist thought filtered into Russia from the 1830's on, but they underwent a transformation shortly after their arrival. They took on a pronounced messianic streak that ultimately derived, some scholars have suggested, from the old national myth of "Holy Russia" as the bearer of true Christianity (even if

most of the young were atheists).

The tsarist regime was hostile even to liberalism, let alone socialism. So politically-minded youth were forced into clandestine and conspiratorial forms of political action, which tended to push both their ideas and their methods toward extremism. This was the context for the Russian populist movement of the second half of the 19th century and ultimately for the Leninist mutation of Marxism that produced the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. With Western liberalism stifled in the tsarist empire, young people turned to radical parties and ideologies that offered the prospect of simultaneously healing the gaping social divisions in Russian society and leapfrogging past the arrogant, hypocritical West.

Russian Culture

The Russian empire, roiled by apparently unresolvable social and political conflict, nevertheless generated a literary tradition that was at least the equal of its Western counterparts. The best novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky are as great as those of Balzac and Hugo in France or Dickens and George Eliot in Britain. Anton Chekhov wrote some of the greatest short stories of the 19th century as well as some of its greatest plays. During the early 20th century, Russian artists were among the pioneers of modernism in music (Igor Stravinsky), dance (Ballet Russe), and painting (Marc Chagall), taking Paris by storm. And during the brief interval between the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and Stalin's consolidation of his

dictatorship at the end of the 1920's, Soviet filmmakers, led by Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, created one of the world's great cinematic traditions. Russian contributions to modern poetry by Osip Mandelstam, Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak, and Joseph Brodsky are of the same high caliber as those of Eliot, Auden, and Yeats in the West.

But there is a significant difference: The great Russian writers and artists often created their best work in exile from an oppressive regime or under circumstances in which they had to fear arrest and even execution. The list of Stalin's victims among the great Russian writers and artists of the 20th century is a long one.

In 1967 Anna Akhmatova, one of the greatest poets of the 20th century, traveled to Britain to receive an honorary degree from Oxford University. Among her fellow recipients was the British poet Siegfried Sassoon, one of the most influential poets of the First World War, just as Akhmatova would write some of the greatest poems of the Second World War.

But the difference between the two great poets is instructive: Sassoon's life was in danger in the trenches of the First World War, an experience he captured unforgettably in his poem "Attack." Akhmatova was ironically safer during the Second World War than she was during the years of Stalin's terror both before and after the war. Western poets in the 20th century did not fear that their governments might murder them (at least not deliberately). But Akmatova's husband was murdered by the Bolsheviks; her close friend Mandelstam was executed on Stalin's orders; and her son was sent to the Gulag by Stalin and kept there as a hostage. No one could describe the fear of

the soldier about to go over the parapet of his trench more vividly than Sassoon could; and similarly, no one could describe the experience of Stalin's terror more searingly than Akhmatova did in her poems of the 1930's and 40's.

"Shakespeare's plays," she wrote "—the sensational atrocities, passions, duels—are child's play compared to the life of each one of us. Of the sufferings of those executed and sent to concentration camps I dare not speak.... But even our disaster-free biographies are Shakespearean tragedy multiplied by a thousand."

Professor William Fredlund's year-long course on Russian history and culture will guide students through the past millennium of Russia's fraught encounter with the West, showing why liberty and democracy failed to take root there, even as the country's writers and artists made their own imperishable contributions to the culture of the modern world.

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Book Review

A Gift to the World on Christmas Day

Review by Eno Schmidt, a Silicon Valley retired executive and entrepreneur, community volunteer, and student at the Institute

With this fall's start of ISWC's new year-long course on "The History of Russia," and the summer's world events unfolding in Afghanistan that vividly remind us how a government can fall in less than a week with its citizens scattering and fleeing widespread violence, let us ponder how fortunate the world was on December 25, 1991. On that date, in one of the most unexpected dissolutions of a superpower, the USSR officially divided peacefully into its previous 15 constituent parts, now each a separate nation. Conor O'Clery tells the dramatic tale focused on that one day, when the nuclear codes controlled by Mikhail Gorbachev, General Secretary of the Communist Party and leader of the defunct Soviet Union, passed to Boris Yeltsin, President of the largest of those new countries, the Russian Federation.



**Moscow, December 25, 1991:
The Last Day of the Soviet Union**

By Conor O'Clery

O'Clery's narrative approach follows the television series 24 in an hour-by-hour forward movement while adding the intriguing exposition of a Shakespearean foil between the two main protagonists. Each reader will decide whether the author ultimately makes his case: Is it Antony to Brutus or Horatio to Hamlet or some other peculiarly Russian combination? The structure also allows O'Clery to weave into the fabric a series of historical events, involving what to many of us may be unfamiliar Russian names and places in the six years preceding, culminating so unexpectedly in a peaceful transition of power on that symbolic Christmas day of 1991.

Gorbachev vs. Yeltsin

Here is O'Clery on the Shakespearean opposition:

"Its major players are two contrasting figures whose baleful interaction has changed the globe's balance of power. It is the culmination of a struggle for supremacy between Mikhail Gorbachev—the urbane, sophisticated communist idolized by the capitalist world, and Boris Yeltsin—the impetuous, hard-drinking democrat perceived as a wrecker in Western capitals. The ousted president and his

usurper behave in a statesmanlike manner before the cameras. Yet rarely in world history has an event of such magnitude been determined by the passionate dislike of two men for each other.... Nevertheless the malevolence of Yeltsin and the vanity of Gorbachev do not stand in the way of something akin to a political miracle taking place. On December 25, 1991, a historical event on a par with the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 or the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1923 occurs without a foreign war or bloody revolution as catalyst.... The mighty Soviet army relinquishes an empire of subject republics without firing a shot. It all happens very quickly.”

For 21st-century Americans seemingly facing one international crisis after another, it is easy to forget the optimistic potential turning point of December 25, 1991. Would it be the end of the Cold War ending risk of nuclear holocaust and starting Western democratic and free market reforms, raising the standards of living for hundreds of millions of people? O’Clery describes it as “a high-water mark in Moscow’s relations with the Western world, and in particular the United States. Only once before in history has Russia looked to the West with such enthusiasm for inspiration. That was three centuries earlier, when Peter the Great introduced European reforms and moved the Russian capital from Moscow to St. Petersburg as a window to the West. His legacy survived until 1917 and the triumph of the Bolsheviks.”

Gorbachev, The Last General Secretary

In 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev rose to the highest power in the Soviet Union becoming the eighth (and last) General Secretary of the Communist Party. To address the massive problems faced by the 293 million people in a country covering one-seventh of the Earth’s land surface, Gorbachev actively promoted a couple of famous policies—*perestroika*, literally meaning “restructuring,” signaling the end

of central planning; and *glasnost*, literally meaning “openness,” involving wider dissemination of information. But the economic mismanagement and general corruption stemming from Communist totalitarianism ultimately were too widespread to be solved without the most radical changes. For example, in the preceding seven decades the subsidies for food and basic materials had been set by the Politburo, and by 1991 there were severe shortages of just about every consumer product. O’Clery provides some delicious examples of how Russians employed their sense of humor when confronting these travails:

- People told bitter anecdotes about how bad things had become. A forgetful old man stands outside a supermarket with an empty shopping bag, wondering if he has done his shopping or not.
- Many jokes were aimed at party privileges. In Congress a deputy complains to the presidium, “I want to work like I do under communism and live like under capitalism,” and is told, “No problem! Join us on the platforms.”
- A Russian moves to Latvia in the hope that one day he will wake up abroad (he soon does). How does a clever Russian Jew talk to a foolish Russian Jew? By telephone from New York.
- A popular anecdote described a dog praising perestroika, saying, “My chain is a little longer, the dish is further away, but I can now bark all I want.”

Cynicism pervaded the society. Many people joked that they pretended to work; the government pretended to pay them; and that the four most serious problems facing agriculture were spring, summer, autumn, and winter.

Gorbachev had promised that consumer goods would be more available after implementing his

policies of perestroika and glasnost, but by the late 1980's the Soviet society's gears had frozen. Emblematic of the inertia, Gorbachev even had to make it "clear that everything that was not forbidden by law was to be allowed, reversing the unwritten rule that everything not expressly allowed was prohibited." After 70 years of totalitarian one-party Communist rule, people in general had become less willing to work hard and were much less innovative. Wary of the great risk that a party bureaucrat might suddenly destroy their lives because explicit permission had not been granted, people had become accustomed to the idea that it was better to ask permission first. At any rate, Gorbachev's clarifications from on high were not going to have an immediate impact.

Concomitant with the shortages and corruption, organized crime had become a serious problem in the Soviet Union. O'Clery observes with a bit of his own irony that "with the unleashing of state assets into private hands, it is about to become a major phenomenon in post-revolutionary Russia."

Yeltsin, The Pragmatist

Gorbachev's reforms included promoting Boris Yeltsin. In his post as Communist Party head in a Siberian province, Yeltsin had made a reputation for efficiency and pragmatism. Accordingly, Gorbachev made him first secretary of the Moscow Communist Party. From this position,

"Yeltsin found that the task of reviving Moscow, the center of the intellectual, cultural, scientific, business, and political life of the country, was impossible under the failing command system... The city was in a wretched state. Everywhere there was 'dirt, endless queues, overcrowded public transport.' The vegetable warehouses... were a scandal, full of rotting produce, rats, and cockroaches. Sorting and packing was done by resentful squads of citizens dragooned into service."

Yeltsin used his role of reformer in Moscow to become a populist hero known for fighting for the average person. At the same time, he displayed his volatile personality (or was it his keen political sense?) in very public disagreements with Gorbachev. Yeltsin mastered the art of appearing in public, frequently walking by himself in the streets where people would recognize him and approach him to talk or shake his hand. He developed outside the Communist Party a popular base that continued to support him when he resigned from the party and became a well-liked politician. First he got elected to represent his Siberian provincial district in a Russian (not Soviet) republic parliament. Then ultimately he was elected as President of the Russian republic. Democratic reforms implemented by Gorbachev provided openings to the democratic and nationalist forces that by late 1991 would result in the complete removal from power of Gorbachev himself and the Communist Party. O'Clery provides a story emblematic of this change that we can all picture:

"And on November 7, 1990 after Gorbachev and his comrades had reviewed the annual military parade in Red Square commemorating the October Revolution, Yeltsin appeared at the head of an anticommunist crowd organized by the radical group Democratic Russia. They carried pictures of the last tsar, Nicholas II, and banners displaying black humor, such as '1917 the crime—1990 the punishment.'"

The Coup Attempt and Yeltsin on the Tank

This review started with marveling at the peaceful transition of power from Gorbachev to Yeltsin on December 25. But in fact, some members of the military and Communist Party had endeavored to thwart this course of events in August 1991 by attempting a coup d'état. These were people who believed that reforms had gone in the wrong direction, democracy was not appropriate for the Soviet Union, and totalitarian rule needed to be reimposed.



Many of us remember photos of Yeltsin on the Russian tank giving his call to strike.

While Gorbachev was vacationing in his Crimean dacha on the Black Sea, representatives of five key sectors of the Soviet Union plotted to take control of the government and remove him. These men captured Gorbachev and on August 19, 1991, announced that they were taking control of the Soviet government upon Gorbachev's "illness." But the leaders of the coup delayed orders to arrest 80 key democrats and thus committed "one of many misjudgments that doomed the coup from the outset." Yeltsin was able to make his way to the Russian White House, which at the time was the meeting place of the elected representatives of parliament.

As O'Clery tells the story:

"Outside the [Russian] White House armored vehicles... took up position but without orders of any kind. The division chief of staff...said he had no intention of harming any of the young men and middle-aged women who had started milling around outside the White House, furious at the idea that Yeltsin might be arrested. Shortly after midday Yeltsin came out, flanked by bodyguards armed with Kalashnikov rifles, and climbed aboard a T-72 tank....

He called for a general strike and opposition to the 'right-wing, reactionary unconstitutional coup.' ... The coup had already begun to falter. Around the city, tank crews were fraternizing with pedestrians... Monday evening, television viewers saw the committee

for the first time—six men in grey-blue suits... There was derisive laughter when an Italian journalist asked if they had consulted General Pinochet on how to stage a coup."

And in a few more days the coup collapsed from lack of popular support and because the coup leaders had not taken violent and decisive action immediately to arrest Yeltsin and others. The leaders of the attempted coup were arrested and imprisoned, and Gorbachev, although released and reinstated as leader of the Soviet Union, made a series of public political blunders, further yielding to Yeltsin the clear democratic initiative and popular support.

The complete failure of the attempted coup resulted in Yeltsin becoming even more popular as a democratic and reform leader in the republic of Russia and Gorbachev being perceived trying to hold on to power as the head of a no longer needed Soviet central government. Yeltsin exploited this advantage in early December 1991 by secretly signing a new agreement with the also newly elected national leaders of Ukraine and Belarus. The agreement officially dissolved the Soviet Union and effectively left Gorbachev as head of a nonexistent

nation. Gorbachev did not declare martial law. According to O'Clery, "whether he was tempted or not, Gorbachev did not try. He was not prepared to spark a civil war."

Secret Archives Released

In addition to the peaceful handover of the control of the nuclear weapons from Gorbachev to Yeltsin, another fascinating element of the transition on December 25, 1991 involved Gorbachev handing over to Yeltsin the Archives of the General Secretary:

"A collection of between 1,000 and 2,000 files... contained secret documents passed on by Soviet leaders from the time of the founding of the state by Lenin... Though many of the crimes of past Communist leaders had been acknowledged for the first time under Gorbachev's policy of glasnost, the top-secret documents still held proof of criminal actions at the highest levels of Soviet power, most of which had never been admitted publicly. They implicated recent Soviet leaders in the cover-up and denials of the Stalin terror and many other bloody episodes that would sustain charges that, in the past, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was a vast criminal conspiracy and was implicated in international terrorism."

Included in these documents was proof that Stalin and the Politburo had approved the killing of 25,700 Polish prisoners in the Katyn Forest near Smolensk in 1940. For years the Soviet Union had claimed that the Nazis had committed the atrocity after invading the Soviet Union. When the exhumation of bodies in 1990 forced admission of the truth (the Nazi forces did not reach the killing zone in the Katyn Forest, just east of the Russian border, until nearly a year after the massacre, making it impossible for the Germans to be involved), the government still had maintained that Stalin was solely responsible for the crime. Attributing all blame to Stalin had allowed the Communist Party to dismiss it as another of Stalin's

aberrations, but these secret files documented that the highest level of Soviet Communist Party leadership had approved the killings and that Gorbachev also had known of this history over his previous five years in power. These files exposed yet another cover-up and indictment of the Communist Party legacy. Yeltsin later released the files to the public, forcing historical revision.

Another discovery from the secret files was an order given by Lenin for the execution of 25,000 Russian Orthodox priests during 1918 through 1921. O'Clery indicates that the evidence as to whether these priests were all killed still is not clear, but the significance of the document is that not only does history associate Stalin with bloody atrocities, but now Lenin "as the father of the [Soviet] nation" also must bear responsibility for mass killings.

Nuclear Disaster Avoided

So on December 25, 1991, the world had dodged a big bullet. The Soviet Union in 1986 had reached a peak of approximately 45,000 nuclear weapons. Boris Yeltsin as the leader of a democratic Russian republic had outmaneuvered Mikhail Gorbachev, leader of the previous central government and Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which was officially and peacefully dissolved. The nuclear codes were in Boris Yeltsin's control.

Institute for the Study of Western Civilization

10060 Bubb Road (408) 864-4060
Cupertino, CA 95014 WesternCiv.com

Odysseys

A Russian Idyl

By Sharon Martin, vice president of marketing at the Institute

It was a trip like no other, before or since.

In the summer of 1991 when I was casting about for some productive way to spend my first Apple sabbatical, a flyer came in the mail advertising “Three Weeks of Spiritual and Ecological Enrichment in Russia” with all expenses covered for an amazing price of just under \$3,000. The sponsoring organizations were the North American Conference on Christianity and Ecology (NACCE) and the Soviet Save Peace and Nature (SPAN) collective. It was to be a floating conference aboard “one of the best cruise ships in Russia” and would travel nearly 1,000 miles along rivers, lakes, and canals from Moscow to Leningrad (as St. Petersburg was called at that time).

Well! I was a kid who cannonballed in red alert drills in our grammar school hallways and knew people who had built backyard bomb shelters, so I must say a trip to Russia sounded scary, even in those more recent years of glasnost. I knew nothing of the sponsors, nor who would be going,

but since the trip departure was only three weeks away, I signed up quickly before I could talk myself out of it, and started packing. (What do you take to Russia? toilet paper? peanut butter? gifts?)

It was fun to walk up to the American Airlines check-in at the San Jose airport curb and give my final destination to the astonished bag boy: “Moscow... No, really! San Jose to Los Angeles to Helsinki to Moscow.” He immediately left his post unattended and whisked my bags personally and with great flourish to the loading dock. At a three-hour layover in Los Angeles, I met some of the other conference-goers, including a flock of Orthodox monks from a monastery in Platina, CA and an Episcopal priest from Vancouver, Fr. McFerran (“Fr. Mac”). The rest of the flights are fuzzy now, but I remember deplaning at the Sheremetyevo airport in Moscow, where my luggage had miraculously arrived without incident 20 hours, 3 flights, 3 countries, and 3 airlines later (thanks in part, no doubt, to the San Jose bag boy)! We were met by some delightful young Russian translators who shepherded us to our ship, docked in the Moskva River port.

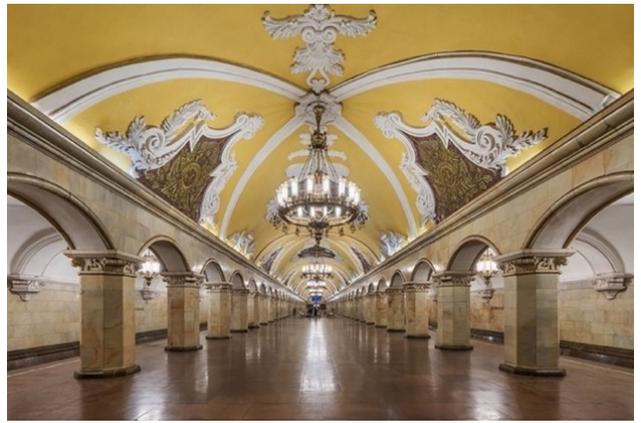
I was a kid who
cannonballed in red alert
drills in grammar school
and knew people who had
built backyard bomb
shelters.

The Fyodor Dostoyevsky

I was delighted to learn that our ship was the Фёдор Достоевский (*Fyodor Dostoyevsky*) and that it was one of a fleet of cruise ships built in the 1980's in East Germany for

Soviet vacationers. (Some of the fleet, since refurbished, are still in use by Viking along the same routes.) About 200 Russians were on board, 65 Americans (some Russian-born or otherwise bilingual), and a handful of British and French television journalists who were documenting the trip.

It was a beautiful sunny Friday, August 16, and a windsurfing couple in bikinis were my first memorable view of Moscow from my large cabin window. A tour of the ship's four passenger decks oriented us to the dining room, music room, sun deck, and "theater" (where we were to have our ecology discussions). I had my own cabin (for which I had paid an additional \$300), and the ship was beautiful and well-managed though spartan. (Think



Moscow metro station

minimal cabins and bathrooms so tiny the handheld sink faucet doubled as a shower!) The peasant-style food was plentiful—lots of beet and vegetable soup, fish and meat, sour cream, coffee, and tea—and well-served by a staff of waitresses. There were large urns of boiling water in the hallways and metal water pitchers in our cabins, so no "Trotsky's Revenge" was likely. I was quite happy with the accommodations, though I must say I could have done without the Russian pop music piped through my cabin intercom during all waking hours. I turned the volume down as far as possible (but why couldn't it have been Tchaikovsky?)

The next day we had a coach tour of parts of Moscow including **Red Square**, where we toured **St. Basil's Cathedral**, and drove up to Moscow University in the Lenin Hills (a promontory overlooking downtown Moscow with a view of the Kremlin across the river). We also visited the **Arbat**, one of the oldest streets in Moscow and long a bohemian artists' colony. At another point, we drove past the first McDonald's in Russia, where the queue stretched around the block. As perhaps everywhere in the world on a summer Saturday, many bridal parties were posing for pictures in choice locations around the city. One of the great glories of Moscow



Our young Russian translators

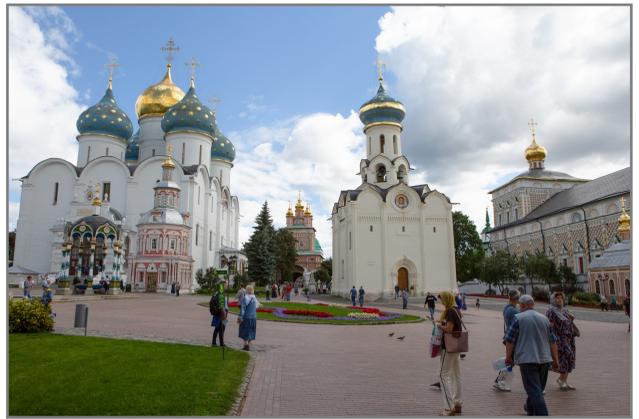
is the subway system, built by Stalin. The stations are works of art and tourist destinations in themselves!

But one of my deepest lingering impressions of Moscow is the mile upon mile of depressing concrete apartment buildings, pre-fabricated during the Khrushchev era, usually five stories high with little or no surrounding vegetation. I thought of the passionate Russian soul that is so deeply expressed by the music of these people and wondered, How can they live like this?

Friendship Forged Through Music

Upon our return to the ship, I heard someone singing and went looking for the source, to find that the music room was empty except for a tenor and a woman playing the piano. I smiled at them, they smiled back, and it seemed to be okay for me to sit down and listen. When the tenor finished singing and left, I walked over to the pianist and asked what she was playing. “Dvorak.” We got that we couldn’t really speak to each other, but after a bit, she started playing a piece I knew how to sing. So I sang, and we spent quite a while getting acquainted using only the universal language of music. That evening, we had the first of many concerts in the music room. The tour organizers had hired professional opera singers, folk musicians, a men’s choir, and a jazz group to accompany us on the journey. That evening’s concert featured the tenor I had heard earlier and my new friend, Natalia Mikhailova, who, I was humbled to learn, was a soprano from the Bolshoi and an Honored Artist of Russia.

On Sunday, August 18, we had a full day’s visit by coach to resplendent **Zagorsk (restored name: Sergiyev Posad)**, about 40 miles from Moscow. Zagorsk is often called the jewel of the Golden Ring, a picturesque string of old Russian cities northeast of



Trinity Lavra at Zagorsk

Moscow that were part of the ancient Rus, and where key events in medieval and imperial Russian history occurred. The **Trinity Lavra** here, established by St. Sergius of Radon (the patron saint of Russia), is the most important Russian monastery and the spiritual center of the Russian Orthodox Church. The lovely complex with its blue and gold onion domes has works by the greatest icon painters of medieval Russia, and the vault contains the tombs of Tsar Boris Godunov and his family. The Soviet government closed the lavra in 1920, and its buildings were used as civic institutions or museums. (After 1991, the Trinity Lavra was returned to monastery use, and in 1993 it was declared a World Heritage Site.)

After dinner that evening, we were treated to a wonderful performance of traditional Russian folk music and dance at the **Tchaikovsky Theater** in Moscow. This is the very hall where Van Cliburn won the International Tchaikovsky Piano competition in 1958, and pictures of the 23-year-old Texan still adorned the walls. (This building is also where, upon visiting the lavatory, I instantly decided that for the balance of the trip, I would endeavor to use only the “facilities” on our ship. This was admittedly quite tricky and required much daily planning!)

Next Up: Sightseeing and a Coup Attempt!

Back on board ship that night, rumors flew through the halls—“Gorbachev is out!” What? What??

The next morning (Monday, August 19), we heard that Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet president, had been replaced by a group of men. One rumor said that he had been removed from power because of ill health; another rumor held that he had been killed; and yet another that he was a prisoner at his dacha in the Crimea.

Nevertheless, we continued with our plans for the day, which were to assist with restoration efforts at the much-revered **Cathedral of the Transfiguration** near Klivomsk, built in the early 19th century to celebrate the defeat of Napoleon. When Moscow was under threat from Hitler’s armies in the Second World War, the cathedral was converted to a fortress and the domes torn away lest they become a target for the enemy. After the war, grain was stored in the cathedral, and for many years people lived in the structure. A young monk, Fr. Dmitri, had enlisted the people of the surrounding area in a restoration project. By the time we were there, the copper dome had been restored and a new roof installed. We were there to “help” this project along (or probably more accurately, to support financially—though we did carry some stones). Our abbot from Platina, Fr.

Herman, joined Fr. Dmitri in celebrating a liturgy of thanksgiving, to which we were invited.

Returning to our ship, we saw tanks and troop carriers going through the streets. *What?!*

We really didn’t

understand what was happening. The news was pouring out of Moscow to the rest of the world, but the coup had control of the state media and were running artistic programs on television. And of course, we were further handicapped by language. (It wasn’t until three weeks later, back in Helsinki, that I was able to buy an English-language news magazine and begin to grasp the details of the coup.)

By the next morning, August 20, we learned that President Bush had declined to recognize the new regime. Boris Yeltzin, barely a month in office as the first Russian president, had called for resistance to the coup and Muscovites were answering the call by constructing barricades around government buildings. Our itinerary for the day specified a tour of the Kremlin, but that was obviously not going to be possible. The American embassy was advising Americans to go home, but we didn’t want to do that as we’d only just arrived! Some of our tour members did go down to Red Square that morning. But this was only two years after the tragedy of Tiananmen Square, and who knew what would happen? I didn’t want to get hurt or jailed or have my cameras confiscated, so I stayed on the ship (and have regretted my decision ever since!)

My braver compatriots joined the thousands of coup protestors at the Kremlin and brought back copies of Yeltzin’s flyer calling for a general strike addressed “To the citizens of Russia.” (We heard that the flyer was done on an Apple Mac! An image of the flyer, which I’ve kept all these years, is on page

The American embassy
was advising Americans
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we’d only just arrived!



Offering bread and salt

2 with an English translation on the back cover.)

That afternoon, we had a party on the deck to celebrate the launching of the cruise. (The captain had already said he would ignore the strike call and proceed with the cruise because the crew needed to be

paid!) A lovely girl in beautiful Russian costume presented the traditional gifts of bread and salt; the Russian men’s choir sang; we did some line dancing to accordion music; and the ship pulled away from the dock to begin its journey through the waterways and birch forests of the Russian north. Over the ensuing hours, the coup fell apart; the Russians among us relaxed; and we looked forward to clear cruising ahead. (I knew that my family back home, watching the news, would be calming down too. In those days before mobile phones and email, I had no way of getting word to them that we had all been perfectly safe through this whole thing.)

In the days that followed, we stopped at many towns along the Volga. We spent a day at **Uglich**, one of the most beloved cities in Russia. After the death of Ivan the Terrible in 1584, his last wife and young son were exiled to Uglich by the regent,

Boris Godunov. Dmitri, the sickly young tsarevitch (tsar’s son), died there under mysterious circumstances, opening the way for Godunov to claim the throne. Legend has it that Dmitri was killed on the order of Godunov, but scholars dispute this. (The story of the purported murder is told in Aleksandr Pushkin’s play *Boris Godunov*, made into an opera by Modest Mussorgsky.) The **Church of St. Demetrios on the Blood** stands on the spot where Dmitri was thought to have been murdered.

Like so many towns in the region, Uglich is beautiful, but threatened—one of the many hydroelectric dams that Stalin constructed on the Volga is just upriver and the earth beneath the town is constantly wet, endangering its historic buildings. As we progressed on our journey, we saw many locks and canals that were constructed under Stalin on the backs (and lives) of thousands of workers and prisoners. The word is that they were simply dispatched when their tasks were over—and buried in the trenches they had dug.

My favorite town on the Golden Ring was beautiful **Yaroslavl**, the oldest of all the existing cities on the Volga and now a World Heritage site. The city was founded by Yaroslav the Wise, a prince of Kievan Rus, at the turn of the first millennium AD (though its Scandinavian roots are much older, dating to the 5th

to 3rd millennium BC). It seemed to me that the town was prosperous and settled, and rather than the empty shelves we had mostly seen in Moscow, the stores had some interesting (and even luxurious) items for purchase. I bought a

Female monasteries
were used to exile
politically
“dangerous” women.

typical Russian fur hat, which I still have (though I have never worn it in sunny California!)

We stopped at the little village of **Goritz**, where there is a female monastery. Such places were used here and elsewhere in Europe to exile politically “dangerous” women. For example, two relatives of Ivan the Great were forced to become nuns and kept under house arrest here, and in 1569 he gave orders to drown the two “nuns” in the nearby river. But today, Goritz is a peaceful place, where the local populace was outdoors enjoying a sunny day. We photographed some charming rural homes, most of them very colorful.

In the 14th century, the monastic movement came northward into the Volga basin, attracted by the beauty and seclusion of the birch forests, much as the early hermits of the Christian church had migrated to the deserts of Egypt and the Levant. If it weren't for this, the area would not have developed as it has. Monasteries in medieval Russia were not just retreats, but served also as infirmaries, poor-houses, and foundling homes. The monks recorded daily events too, and it is these archives that provide a chronicle of medieval Russia. After the Russian revolution, many of the monasteries were pulled down, and some were flooded by the lakes created by the hydroelectric dams. But the monastic tradition is still strong in the area, having survived 70 years of Soviet repression.

Life Aboard Ship

On days when our ship was under sail, we had lectures in the top deck theater, usually on environmental issues of both the United States and Russia. Russian topics included the ecology of the Volga River and the Leningrad basin and a wrenching presentation by a young couple who had been



Yaroslavl on the "Golden Ring"

residents of Chernobyl. Russia has been environmentally compromised, the result of years of Soviet focus on rapid progress rather than conservation of resources (as has too often been the case in other countries). One man in the audience commented, “All the ecological problems in Russia are caused by lack of an owner.” It seemed clear to us that Russians no longer feared retribution for speaking out against their government. In fact, one of our sessions featured a mock “town hall” meeting in which the hypothetical community was being poisoned by a nearby chemical plant. The “plant manager” and the “mayor” were portrayed as the typical bureaucrats and pawns. At the end, the mayor was presented with a dead fish!

Every night we enjoyed a professional concert on the ship, followed by what we called “Russian Club”—a couple of hours of impromptu sing-along in the music room. I had brought some books of Russian and American folk songs and some opera and “Great American Songbook” selections, hoping that there would be a piano on board and someone who could play it. I needn't have worried! Among us were many talented musicians, amateurs as well as professionals. We enjoyed singing such world standards as “Moscow Nights,” “Dark Eyes,”

“Stardust,” “Kalinka,” and “O Sole Mio.” Some of us amateurs sang solos too. (After my “debut” in the Russian Club, Fr. Herman, an opera enthusiast, took to calling me “the diva,” which was fun.) One night some of the Russians invited me to their cabin, and we had a long, cross-translated discussion about American life. I tried my best to answer their questions (the most memorable was: Do you all keep guns in your houses?)

After moving through the multiple locks of the Volga-Baltic waterways, we entered Ladoga, the biggest lake in Europe, which served as the food and supply lifeline to the people of Leningrad during the 900-day siege during the Second World War. Here we visited **Valaam**, a monastic island in the northwest corner of the lake. Our boat had to dock a long way from the monastery, so we had a walk of about three miles through lovely woods and meadows on a brisk but sparkling summer day. If there is any place on the planet free from environmental degradation, this is surely it! One tradition holds that the first Christian mission here was the result of indirect outreach from Iona in Scotland. That is, that over several generations, Iona monks had established missions in Scandinavia and eventually at Valaam, *before* the traditional first establishment of Christianity in the Kievan Rus in 988 AD. (But this is almost certainly not true. Most scholars date the founding of Valaam to the 14th century.)

At the end of our monastery visit, we were faced with the long walk back to the ship, but here fate stepped in with one of the most memorable incidents of the trip. A small fishing vessel tied up near the monastery was about to pull out, and the fishermen asked a couple of us ladies if we’d like a ride. The men were steaming fish on the deck, and we skimmed across the blue Ladoga waves eating



Kizhi, an open-air museum and World Heritage Site

hot smoked fish with our fingers—a total delight until, too soon, we pulled up to the gangplank of the *Dostoyevsky* and our “off road” adventure was over!

We also had a voyage across Lake Onega, where we visited the island of **Kizhi**, an open-air museum (and now a World Heritage site), which features 17th century wooden buildings constructed completely without nails. Some are original to the site, and others have been moved here from other locations. The houses are clearly Scandinavian, and the signs here are in Finnish as well as Russian. We also had a stop at charming **Petrozavodsk**, a port on the Onega, where we found the best ice cream of the trip! (Our ship had run out of ice cream three days into our tour. Fruit had been scarce too. I remember how excited we were when the *Dostoyevsky* received a shipment of oranges from Tashkent!)

Our last week was spent in **Leningrad**. To say the city is beautiful does not do it justice. It is a stunning fairytale of a place! Unfortunately, it has also borne years of neglect, and the once splendid city built by Peter the Great as his “window on the West” appeared more dingy than dazzling. (Hopefully, it looks much better now, 30 years later). When we were there, the citizens had voted to change the



Malachite Room, Hermitage Museum

name back to its original St. Petersburg, but the change had not yet been implemented. We took a bus tour around town, and I remember our tour guide being very frank about the history and recent fortunes of the city. She commented that, only two years before, she would not have been able to speak freely.

There was much to see in Leningrad. One of the most distinctive buildings is the **Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood**. If anything, this is an even more ornate structure than St. Basil's in Moscow. It is a former Orthodox church, but now functions as a museum. On this site in 1881, Tsar Alexander II was assassinated, and the church was constructed by the Romanov family to honor him. The suffix "on Spilled Blood" refers to the assassination.

The city is also the site of the **Monument to the Heroic Defenders of Leningrad**. For 900 days beginning in 1941—two and a half years without letup—the city of Leningrad suffered siege by German blockade. During that time, as many

During the 900-day siege of Leningrad in WWII, as many people died as the entire war losses suffered by the United States in the whole of our history—nearly 1.5 million.

people died in Leningrad as the entire war losses suffered by the United States in the whole of our history—nearly 1.5 million. (*The 900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad* by Harrison E. Salisbury is the most moving nonfiction book you'll ever read.)

On a free morning, I headed to the **Hermitage** with Dr. Joe King, a retired professor from South Carolina, a trip buddy with whom I had shared many insightful conversations. The name "hermitage" was given by Catherine the Great to that part of the Winter Palace where she kept her art treasures, which only Catherine and her courtiers could access. She wrote, "All this is only for the mice and myself to admire!" We had about four hours in the museum, but at that time there were no guide pamphlets (or guides, for that matter), and trying to figure out where to go in that vast palace was a challenge. We wandered about, however, and with luck, happened upon the magnificent Malachite Room and the small White Dining Room, where in 1917 the Bolsheviks captured the last ministers of the Provisional Government, launching the Soviet era.

After our Hermitage visit, Dr. Joe went back to the ship, and I stayed on the Nevsky Prospekt (the main shopping street of Leningrad). Here I had an amusing encounter. I was alone in a sea of Russian speakers with only my Russian "please" and "thank you." In a

shop on the Prospekt, I saw a large ornate samovar that I thought would be fun to own. But it was high up on a shelf, and the salesperson had no English. In Russian shops at that time (the Soviet workforce always being maximally padded),



Hand-colored photograph of the lost Amber Room, 1931

a salesperson would help you make your selection, then hand you a slip of paper to take to the cashier; you would then bring your receipt back to the salesperson, who would then give your item to the wrapping person at another desk, who would finally hand over your purchase. Using gestures only, I at last got through this whole convoluted process. As I picked up my bulky package, I was startled by a woman nearby who suddenly leaned over and said in a conspiratorial Mississippi drawl, “How you gonna get that home?”

We had a side trip by coach to **Tsarskoye Selo** (“Tsar’s Village”), the imperial summer residence area, located near the town of Pushkin (named for the great Russian poet), about 15 miles from Leningrad. Here is the ornate **Catherine Palace** and other historic structures. The Germans occupied this area during the Second World War, and the damage done to the buildings was extensive. The Russians have been restoring the Catherine Palace since the 1960’s, and much had been completed when we were there. On display were black and white photographs of the rooms taken at the end of

the war, and one can see how much has been meticulously accomplished, including restoration of the intricate gold leaf on the walls and architectural elements.

Some of the treasures of the palace disappeared during the German occupation and have never been found—for example, the walls of the Amber Room, decorated in amber panels backed with gold leaf and mirrors, considered an “eighth wonder of the world.”

We had a telling medical incident in Leningrad. Fr. Mac, the priest from Vancouver, had gone with two tour companions to Dom Knigi (“House of Books”—affectionately called just “the Dom”), the huge Art Nouveau bookstore on the Prospekt. Fr. Mac took a fall on the Dom stairs and twisted his ankle. His companions, thinking it was a sprain, managed to get him to a taxi but did not have the location of the ship written in Russian to give the driver. So the driver went to all five ports on the Neva River before they found the *Dostoyevsky*. On the way, the driver (described by Fr. Mac as a maniac who drove at breakneck speeds through traffic lights) hit a pedestrian and flipped him over the front of the cab—and sped on! Upon arrival, the ship doctor recognized that the ankle was broken, so called for an ambulance and sent Fr. Mac to a hospital. Upon arrival, they discovered that the X-ray room was on the fourth floor—and there was no elevator! Somehow, Fr. Mac’s companions got him up the stairs. By all accounts, the medical staff (though lacking what we would consider basic equipment) was excellent, displaying not only competence but compassion. The only crutches in the hospital were half-length (just up to the hands), but the next day the hospital doctor came to the ship and brought new full-length crutches as a gift for Fr. Mac.

On our last evening on the ship, we had a farewell dinner—a fabulous buffet of delicacies, fish, roast beef, cheeses, breads, dips, candies, pastries, wines, champagne, and of course, vodka. A riotous show followed in the music room with the “talent” provided by our own tour amateurs, Russian and American; and we all sang! But then we had to bid a sad goodbye to our new Russian friends, knowing that they faced grave challenges in the years ahead in their transition to democracy.

The next day, we went by coach to the Leningrad airport, where we boarded our Aeroflot plane to Helsinki. What a culture shock after three weeks in hardscrabble Russia to encounter the well-heeled, gorgeous Finns with their beautiful shops selling designer clothes and Italian leather!

On our final morning, we boarded our flights home, knowing we’d taken the trip of a lifetime!

Epilogue

Natalia and I continued to write to each other after the trip, first by snail mail, then eventually via the Internet. Her husband Valentin and son Alexander (Sasha), who was approaching college age at that time, both know English and translated our letters. Five years after our trip, I invited Natasha to come to California for a visit. I had to line up translators, of course, but that wasn’t difficult as there are many Russian-speaking people in our area who were glad to help. I organized two concerts for Natasha to perform at churches in Palo Alto and Santa Clara. She had been to San Francisco before with the Bolshoi but enjoyed seeing the sights again.

Some of you may remember Charles Cramer, the wonderful landscape photographer who has exhibited at the Institute. At Charlie’s invitation, Natasha and I took a trip to Yosemite and stayed two



Natasha and Sharon about to sing in St. Mark’s choir, Santa Clara, 1996

nights at Charlie’s “dacha.” He also organized a musical evening there for Natasha, to which he invited his colleagues from the Ansel Adams Gallery to come hear the Russian soprano—accompanied by the multi-talented Charlie on piano!

Natasha and I still faithfully maintain our now 30-year friendship during which I have also seen Sasha several times. (He worked for a time for Oracle and was here for conferences.) Since then, he married and he and his wife now have three children, the oldest of whom is now in college herself.

When Dr. Bill asked me to write this story, I resurrected all my trip memorabilia including Yeltzin’s flyer. I couldn’t find a translation on the Internet, so I sent a copy to Sasha. He found a “canonical” translation, which follows. In our email conversation, I commented that it was very difficult for non-Russian speakers to know what was happening in the moment all those years ago. He replied:

“At that time, it was difficult for even a Russian speaker to understand what was happening... People are not even ready to agree on what happened in 1917. ;)”

To the Citizens of Russia

On the night of August 18-19, 1991, the legally elected President of the country was removed from power. Whatever the reasons for this dismissal, we are dealing with a right-wing reactionary anti-constitutional coup. With all the difficulties and difficult trials experienced by the people, the democratic process in the country is acquiring an ever-deeper scope and irreversible character.

The people of Russia are becoming the masters of their own destiny, significantly limiting the uncontrolled rights of unconstitutional bodies, including party bodies. The Russian leadership took a decisive position on the Union Treaty, striving for the unity of the Soviet Union, the unity of Russia. Our position on this issue made it possible to significantly speed up the preparation of this treaty, coordinate it with all the republics and set the date for its signing: August 20.

This development of events angered the reactionary forces, pushed them to irresponsible adventurous attempts to solve the most complex political and economic problems by force. Attempts have already been made to carry out a coup. We believed and still believe that such forceful methods are unacceptable, they discredit the USSR in front of the whole world, undermine our prestige in the world community, return us to the era of the Cold War and the isolation of the Soviet Union from the world community.

All this forces us to DECLARE UNLAWFUL THE SO-CALLED COMMITTEE that has come to power. Accordingly, all decisions and orders of this committee are declared illegal. We are sure that local authorities will strictly follow the constitutional laws and decrees of the President of the RSFSR.

We call on the citizens of Russia to give a worthy answer to the putschists and demand that the country return to normal constitutional development. Of course, it is necessary to provide an opportunity for the President of the country, Gorbachev, to address the people.

We demand the immediate convocation of the Extraordinary Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR.

We are absolutely sure that our compatriots will not allow the arbitrariness and lawlessness of the putschists who have lost all shame to assert themselves.

We appeal to the servicemen to show high citizenship and not take part in the reactionary coup.

In order to fulfill these requirements, WE CALL FOR A UNIVERSAL UNLIMITED STRIKE. We have no doubt that the world community will give an objective assessment of the cynical attempt at a right-wing coup.

President of the RSFSR Yeltsin
Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the RSFSR Silaev
I. o. Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR Khasbulatov

Moscow, August 19, 1991, 9.00