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Leningrad, 1977

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Life as a student in the USSR during the Brezhnev years yielded experiences that, in the long run, illuminated both the origins and the collapse of the Soviet system.

IN January 1977, my wife and I boarded the Trans-Siberian Railroad in Khabarovsk and traveled westward across Russia. I was to spend six months doing dissertation research in Leningrad on the U.S.–Soviet scholarly exchange administered by the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX). My affiliation was with the History Faculty at Leningrad State University. There I was assigned to an adviser, who met with me once at the start of my stay—another man was present for the meeting but remained un-introduced and silent—and signed my “scholarly plan” outlining my goals for my six months but did not otherwise help or hinder my work.

I was a Ph.D. student in political science at Yale. My dissertation topic dealt with the effort by the Bolshevik regime in Russia to create a socialist economic system during the War Communism period. Inspired by Stephen Cohen’s marvelous biography of Bukharin and Cohen’s conviction that this period, though deeply formative, had been understudied, I sought to understand the framework of state–society relations built by the Bolsheviks during the Civil War by studying industrial relations.¹ This was the period, after all, when Gosplan (the state planning agency) and GOELRO (the state electrification body) were created; centralized state administration replaced market relations; the regime imposed state control over autonomous workers’ organizations such as trade unions and workers’ control councils; the phases of wartime emergency brought surges of all-out mobilization of manpower and industrial output (including Trotsky’s

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“labor armies”), whereas in periods when hostilities subsided, small-scale market-oriented production and exchange were permitted. The War Communism model had strongly influenced Stalin’s conception of socialism. In my view, War Communism was more than an improvised response to wartime necessity; it reflected the Bolsheviks’ mobilizational strategy for building socialism. It was a period when the Bolsheviks often permitted utopian fantasy to overtake sober calculation but also when their vision of rapid technological progress led them to embrace research into rocketry, nuclear power, mass electrification, and radio and television broadcasting. In a short span of time, many of the enduring institutional features of the Soviet regime were constructed, bringing about recurring tension between the regime’s mobilizing, revolutionary impulse and its dependence on planning, rationality, and institutional stability. I grew to understand these themes more clearly only after I had worked over the materials I collected while on the exchange and considered the early Soviet experience in the comparative light of other modernizing revolutions of the twentieth century.²

My dissertation sought to use historical and qualitative methods to address questions that were then current in the comparative literature on modernization and development. I was not trained as a historian, and my research methods were self-taught. Before I went to Leningrad, however, I had spent about a year and a half working through the secondary literature on the War Communism period available at the Yale and Harvard libraries, the New York Public Library, and the Hoover Institution at Stanford. I had also done a great deal of work in primary sources, including the newspapers and journals published by local governments in Petrograd and Moscow, by trade unions and opposition groups, and the party press; I had read numerous memoirs by principals in the revolution and by foreign visitors. Soviet historians had done a lot of solid work on the period, much of it published during Khrushchev’s Thaw, when it was possible for Soviet historiography to discuss the novel institutional forms in which workers’ initiative had been expressed. I had also worked through the multivolume set of official documents, *Dekrety sovetskoi vlasti* (Decrees of Soviet Power) and standard histories of the regime such as that of E. H. Carr.³ I had a fair idea of the kinds of materials that would be available in the Soviet libraries but hoped especially to be able to use the archives, on which Soviet historians had drawn extensively.

I requested archival access as part of my application to participate in the exchange and listed the particular

fondy I wanted to examine. My request was denied, as was standard at the time; few Western researchers gained access to archives dealing with the Soviet period, even so distant a period as that of War Communism. Hopeful that an in-person attempt might succeed, I visited the state history archive when I was in Moscow on *komandirovka*. There the staff members were courteous but firm. Yes, we remember your application, they told me. But the way you have framed your question is quite different from the way we would do it. Therefore it is quite impossible for you to work here.

Once during my stay in Leningrad, I met for a consultation with a leading Soviet historian of the War Communism period, Vladimir Drobizhev. His work was professional and intelligent, and I sought him out to discuss my work with him. Drobizhev was cordial, but the meeting was unproductive. The archives, he assured me, were in such a state of disorder that there could be no possible benefit to me working there; even his own graduate students did not use them. Rather, gravely and with a straight face, he advised me to read Lenin deeply. “Vchitaites v Lenina,” he said.

I also sought an interview with another well-known historian of the period, Efim Gimpelson (whose son, Vladimir, today is a distinguished specialist in labor economics at the Higher School of Economics). I discovered by chance that a young man whom I had gotten to know through mutual acquaintances in Leningrad, a person who was on the fringes of the dissident movement, happened to be Gimpelson’s cousin. Delighted, I thought that approaching Gimpelson through this informal and indirect means might help avoid the inevitable constraints that would limit the value of an interview. To the contrary, when Gimpelson responded to my request for a meeting through the cousin, the answer was, “I am willing to meet with the American. But tell him two things. First, we will not be alone. And, second, the meeting will be entirely useless.” I did not follow up.

These were examples of the restrictions that handicapped scholarly research and communication at that time. Still, I was able to make full use of published sources in the Library of the Academy of Sciences in Leningrad, the Public Library in Leningrad, and the Lenin Library in Moscow. In almost every case, books, newspapers, and journals that I requested were made available, although in a few cases passages had been blackened out by censors, and often pages crumbled in my hand as I turned them, so brittle was the paper they had been printed on. There was a wealth of published literature from the period because the Bolsheviks, certain that their revolution

represented the unfolding of a revolutionary drama of world-historical significance, documented, debated, and analyzed each action they took. They used little of the wooden, stereotyped style of writing that characterized Soviet publications of later years. The wild discrepancy between the Bolsheviks' millennial faith in a socialist transformation of society and the urgent practical problems of managing a shattered economy was vividly present on every page of those publications, with their faded ink and disintegrating paper.

Therefore, although I was not given access to the archives, my work in the libraries was productive. Other Americans who were on the exchange at the same time encountered many more difficulties, particularly if their work depended on archival materials. An archive might suddenly close for repairs the day someone finally gained permission to work there, or a key individual whose approval was required for something would leave for an extended assignment just at the point someone needed his signature. Evening conversations among the Americans in the dormitory were sometimes devoted to wondering whether there was a specific malevolent intelligence at work that found ways to frustrate our plans or whether the universe was essentially indifferent to our needs, and things happened randomly. It was hard to put much credence in the latter theory when so much favored the former one.

We had a few privileges as participants on the scholarly exchange. One was the opportunity to send mail in and out of the country via the diplomatic pouch. We were regularly admonished not to abuse the privilege, but some people did receive contraband books, such as a copy of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* in Russian in a very small printed format, designed specifically to be brought in that way and disseminated, or a compact Russian-language edition of Leonard Schapiro's *History of the CPSU*. Visiting the consulate (and, in Moscow, the embassy) for the weekly mail pickup was a welcome respite.

Another privilege was access to series D coupons that allowed us to purchase food products inexpensively at a "diplomatic gastronom." This was one of a hierarchy of closed stores, often known by their yellow curtains that concealed the abundance of the goods within from passersby on the street. Our gastronom was a modest affair, but we were able to buy inexpensive staples such as ramen noodles, mayonnaise, and tuna fish. Thanks to that gastronom, we were less reliant on local foodstores than most of our Russian friends. Stores at that time were strikingly empty of products; long expanses

of shelves stood empty. Bulgarian conserves were often available, as were some pasta products. But meat and vegetables were in short supply and of low quality and there was next to no fruit. One day cabbages appeared miraculously—this was a few days before International Women's Day (March 8). Their sudden availability was signaled by the fact that women walked around the city with string bags stuffed full of heads of cabbage. The foodstore nearest to our dormitory was particularly desolate. One morning when I stopped in there was a box of dried hake on sale. The fish was emaciated and sad-looking, unappetizing to me. The saleslady, however, recognizing me, kindly encouraged me to buy some. "Redko byvaet," she noted—we rarely have it.

Of course, there was ample food at the farmers' markets at high prices. And when we visited friends at their apartments, their food cupboards were full of staples and jars of preserved fruit and vegetables that they had stocked up on in the fall or preserved themselves from their dacha gardens. Rationing had been introduced that winter in several cities (though not, I believe, in Leningrad), but Soviet citizens could purchase scarce food products through the system of *zakazy* (orders) through their place of work, which also helped alleviate the shortages.

Another privilege may have been informal, but we treated it as a black-letter entitlement. That was the opportunity to visit open cities such as the pretty tourist towns on the Golden Ring. The procedure was to send a telegram to the hotel requesting a room and paying for it in advance at the dirt-cheap Soviet student rate. My wife and I availed ourselves of this opportunity several times. Once we showed up at a hotel reception desk and, after chatting a bit with the desk clerk, presented our passports. She looked at our U.S. passports and gasped: "Akh! Vy ne nashi! ("Akh! You are not one of us!") She was flustered and worried. She insisted that we pay the standard foreign tourist rate, which was ten times the Soviet student rate. I reasoned with her, and assured her that under the rules governing the exchange, we were *stazhery* and hence entitled to the same status as Soviet students. After much discussion and consultations with the manager, she eventually agreed to give us the room at the student rate.

The students in the dormitory where we stayed consisted of about half visiting graduate students from capitalist countries and half Soviet graduate students. (Another, much shabbier dormitory down the street housed students from "fraternal socialist countries.") For the most part, the Soviet students maintained a certain distance, although they were always friendly. The dormitory

had its supervisor—the kommandant—whose authority was more nominal than real (he warned us as we arrived that there was NO DRINKING! in the dorm—there are other establishments in town for that, he explained). It also had its own student Komsomol organization, with a serious and responsible woman as its head.

Not long after we arrived, I told her that I sang in the Yale Russian Chorus, a student choral group at Yale that specialized in singing Russian traditional sacred and secular music. The chorus was planning a visit to Russia over spring break, and I proposed organizing a social evening at the dormitory where we would sing a few pieces, and the Russian students would sing, and we would socialize. The Komsomol head was enthusiastic about the idea and promised to take charge of organizing the event. (This was a period when detente was not dead, but U.S.–Soviet relations were deteriorating under the influence of Jimmy Carter’s emphasis on human rights.) A couple of weeks later, she came to me with a despondent look. She had checked with her superiors, she explained, and they had nixed the proposal. She seemed genuinely disappointed. I thought perhaps she had been surprised to learn that she did not have the autonomy that she thought she had. I reassured her that I understood the situation.

In the end, the chorus did have an opportunity to perform in Leningrad. We visited the Peter-Paul Monastery and sang for the metropolitan of Leningrad and the Northwest region, together with a number of the clergy and seminarians there, and were very kindly received. The metropolitan invited us to a reception afterward, apologizing that, because it was Lent, the repast would be modest. But when he opened the doors and we were ushered into the reception hall, we were amazed to see a table groaning under the weight of an array of fresh fruits and vegetables of a variety and quality that we had not seen for the entire time we had been in Leningrad. It being Lent, there was no meat, but there was an abundance of everything else, including vodka and brandy. This gave me some idea of the real status of the Church in Soviet society.

Occasionally my wife and I visited a small cafe called Pogrebok, located near Nevskii Prospekt. Once we sat at a small table where another young couple was also sitting. I overheard them speaking in German, and I opened up a conversation with them in German. It turned out that they were from East Germany and were studying engineering at the university. We talked about our academic interests, how we liked the city, and so on. I asked whether they ever encountered anti-German senti-

ment in Russia. Yes, the young man said, occasionally people made negative comments about Germans. But then when he told people he was from East Germany—that is, they were “our Germans”—the attitude turned friendly. Then the young man asked whether he could ask a “personal” question. I said, “Of course.” He asked me what I thought the future of the world was, politically speaking—what kind of system would eventually prevail. I answered, cautiously, that I thought perhaps there would be some sort of convergence between the best of the Western democratic system and the best of the Soviet system. He agreed, enthusiastically: yes, he said, he also believed there would be a convergence. But it would be between the Soviet system and the East German system.

By far the greatest benefit for me from participating in the exchange was the opportunity to develop a circle of friends and acquaintances in Leningrad. Some were part of the “second culture,” the loose network of intellectuals and artists of different generations who cultivated their passions for art, poetry, history, philosophy, and politics independently of official institutions. We came to recognize that while there were many circles, the circles ultimately all intersected and formed a dense web of social and cultural capital. A few individuals were actively political and hence vulnerable to arrest; most were hostile to the regime but not actively involved in oppositional activity. Rather, they created islands of intellectual and artistic freedom, shared with trusted friends, in which they pursued their true, though rarely official, vocations. When we asked someone what they did—“chem vy zanimaetes?”—people would often ask in reply, do you mean what do I do for a living—that is, what’s my day job?—or what do I really do? What people did for a living was often of little moment to them; one worked as a guard at the Hermitage Museum, another as a free-lance journalist, a third as a custodian; their real lives were their study of a particular writer or of mathematics or their painting or poetry. One was a student at Leningrad University and was careful about his associations and activities lest he be expelled from the Komsomol and hence from the university. Several people whom we visited were retired and lived on their pensions. The father of one young man with whom we spent a lot of time was a party member and an engineer at a local firm but was evolving toward dissident views.

We spent most evenings with one or another set of these people, enjoying the companionship, the stories, and the jokes and admiring the poetry and painting. The conversation was generally freewheeling, although oc-

asionally the presence of a particular person who was suspected of being an agent for the KGB would inhibit discussion. (For a few days at the end of our stay, we were tailed as we visited our friends.) The conversations concerned history, philosophy, art, politics, and life in the Soviet Union. People were relatively well informed about national and international affairs, thanks in part to BBC, Voice of America, and Deutsche Welle broadcasts, which could usually be heard despite the jamming (Radio Liberty was usually too well blocked to get through). But people had many questions about the United States. Many of our friends eventually emigrated.

The jokes were plentiful and rich. Some concerned Lenin. For example, in one, a Soviet scientist invents a machine that can bring the dead back to life. The question immediately arises, whom should they bring back first? Instantly, everyone agrees that it should be Lenin. So they bring Lenin back to life. He asks for a fresh issue of *Pravda* and a room in the Kremlin in which to read it. Three hours go by, and he doesn't come out. The officials look in, and panic—Lenin has disappeared! They don't know what to do. So they decide to bring back to life Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the Cheka. Dzerzhinsky asks for the same issue of *Pravda* that Lenin had been reading and a lit candle. He places the copy of *Pravda* over the candle flame, and gradually a message appears between the lines of print. "Felix!" it says. "Come at once to Zurich! We're starting all over!"

Another genre consisted of train jokes. In one well-known example, a train is speeding through the forest in a remote part of the country at night. Snow is falling. In the first-class compartment Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev are riding. Suddenly the train stops. The three leaders look at each other. Stalin speaks up first. "Summon the engineer!" he orders. They bring the trembling engineer to him. "What has happened?" Stalin asks. "Why have we stopped?" The engineer has no answer. "Shoot the engineer!" Stalin orders. They shoot the engineer. But the train doesn't move. Then Khrushchev speaks up. "Rehabilitate the engineer!" he orders. They rehabilitate the engineer, but the train still stands there. Finally Brezhnev says, "Let's pull the blinds and pretend we're moving."

We had access to these circles thanks to a friend at Yale, a dynamic young Leningrader who had been forced to emigrate from Russia not long before. He offered to put us in touch with his friends in Leningrad and Moscow if we helped him stay in contact with them. This worked well. It allowed us to enter into relations of trust with a large and varied set of people far more quickly than would have been possible otherwise. I marveled

at the enormous talent of the people whom we met, the meticulous quality of work they did that would not be officially exhibited or published, their passion and integrity. The gulf between the brilliance and creativity of the second culture and the stultified and rigid nature of public life in the official sphere left a deep impression on me. Later it helped me recognize the explosive force of Gorbachev's glasnost policy, which aimed at overcoming the gap between "words and deeds" that had been so evident in the late 1970s.

Some of our friends belonged to the older generation. A few had been involved in the revolution. Twice we visited Olga Grigorevna Shatunovskaia, an Old Bolshevik—that is, a member of the revolutionary generation. Shatunovskaia had been a high-ranking official in the party organization in Moscow in the 1930s before being arrested and sent to the camps. Rehabilitated under Khrushchev, she had been put in charge of compiling a report on Stalin's repression, which she presented before the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 but which Khrushchev found too sensitive to accept. She lived in retirement in Moscow on a personal pension from the Central Committee of the Party. Both times we visited her, her son was present, I think to keep an eye on her and our conversation. For the most part, she preferred not to talk about her political career with us (she made a point of showing us the bug installed on her telephone and occasionally turned on the water faucet in the kitchen to foil the eavesdroppers), but we heard many of her stories from others of her friends whom we visited. Her stories, and those of the other members of the older generation we met, gave me a vivid sense of Soviet history as it affected people's lives: the idealism of the revolutionaries who helped build the regime and the degeneration of the regime into its self-made trap of repression and stagnation, together with the vitality of the traditions of the Russian intelligentsia maintained just below the surface of official life. At the same time, despite the values of honor and solidarity among the intelligentsia, its members viewed the rules of the Soviet system as impediments, to be evaded and ignored; any rule or restriction could be gotten around, usually by exploiting connections or through under-the-table payments. Jobs that afforded lucrative opportunities for self-enrichment (such as a salesman in a pharmacy or bookstore, where goods could be sold out the back door at black market prices) were available for a high price (tens of thousands of rubles); tickets to a sold-out play or concert could be obtained through acquaintances or scalpers; medical services were available by bribing the doctors and nurses.

These routine transactions bred an instrumental view of official rules that, I am ashamed to say, left its mark on us for the first few weeks after we returned to the West.

We were also fortunate in getting a taste of dacha life, visiting friends a few times for weekends at their dacha outside Leningrad. Simple but frequent meals, long walks, and good conversation predominated. In the evening, neighbors came over to visit. One young woman told us about her job at a factory in town that made ballpoint pens, including a specialized pen designed to be used by the cosmonauts. "How is that project going?" I asked. "It may work in outer space," she replied, "but it doesn't work on earth yet." Walking around the dacha community, where the gardens were well tended and the houses homely but lovingly used, I saw in the dualism between life in town and life at the dacha another of the many related polarities that characterized Soviet society: between state and society, large-scale and small-scale, the intimacy and intensiveness of family and friendship versus the artifice and mistrust embedded in formal, official social relations.

Because I interpreted the Bolshevik project to build socialism in Russia as driven by a fierce devotion to an ideological doctrine, my time on the exchange also left me with an abiding interest in the role of ideology in Soviet politics, including its relationship to everyday culture and behavior and the efforts to control public communication. I pursued these issues in a series of projects on Soviet party control over the media and eventually into a close study of the effects of glasnost under Gorbachev. Gorbachev's ultimately futile effort to contain the diversity of values and beliefs current in Soviet society in a makeshift framework of party domination and limited political representation then led me to study the development of legislative institutions in the late 1980s and the 1990s.⁴ These studies benefited from another extended stay in Russia in 1991 and dozens of shorter visits through the 1990s and 2000s.

My life on the exchange in Leningrad gave me a stereoscopic view of the Soviet regime. During the days, I studied documents from the regime's founding period, while evenings and weekends we encountered the realities of present-day Soviet life through our own experiences and the stories of our friends. I came to understand War Communism as a period when the state's effort to build socialism by mobilizing the resources of society left society exhausted and depleted; state building in the Soviet system, I concluded, was at odds with society building and contributed to the enduring chasm between *vlast* and *narod* (power and people) that had

been overcome only rarely and partially in Soviet history (during World War II, for example). This conception of the system later shaped my view of Gorbachev, who recognized that only by reinvigorating civil society could the socialist state rebuild its authority. But it also persuaded me that Gorbachev's reforms would end either in the restoration of some Stalinist-type regime or in the breakdown of the Soviet system and its replacement by one giving institutional voice to the hidden pluralism of Soviet society.

Notes

1. Stephen M. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography, 1888–1938* (New York: Knopf, 1973).

2. A revised version of my dissertation was published as Thomas F. Remington, *Building Socialism in Bolshevik Russia: Ideology and Industrial Organization, 1917–1921* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984). Other publications that came out of the dissertation research included "Varga and the Foundation of Soviet Planning," *Soviet Studies* 34, no. 4 (1982): 585–600; "Institution Building in Bolshevik Russia: The Case of State Kontrol," *Slavic Review* 41, no. 1 (1982): 91–103; and "The Rationalization of State Kontrol," in *Party and Society in the Russian Civil War: Explorations in Social History*, ed. William Rosenberg, Ronald Suny, and Diane Koenker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 210–31.

3. *Dekrety sovetskoi vlasti*, 18 vols. (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatelstvo politicheskoi literatury, 1957–); E.H. Carr, *A History of Soviet Russia* (London: Macmillan, 1950).

4. These publications include Thomas F. Remington, *The Russian Parliament: Institutional Evolution in a Transitional Regime, 1989–1999* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); Remington and Steven S. Smith, *The Politics of Institutional Choice: Formation of the Russian State Duma* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Remington, Moshe Haspel, and Smith, "Electoral Institutions and Party Cohesion in the Russian Duma," *Journal of Politics* 60, no. 2 (1998): 417–39; Remington and Smith, "Theories of Legislative Institutions and the Organization of the Russian Duma," *American Journal of Political Science* 42, no. 2 (1998): 545–72; Remington, "Political Conflict and Institutional Design: Paths of Party Development in Russia," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 14, no. 1–2 (1998): 201–23; Remington and Smith, "Political Goals, Institutional Context, and the Choice of an Electoral System: The Russian Parliamentary Election Law," *American Journal of Political Science* 40, no. 4 (1996): 1280–99; Remington and Smith, "The Early Legislative Process in the Russian Federal Assembly," *Journal of Legislative Studies* 2, no. 1 (1996): 161–92, repr. in *The New Parliaments of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Philip Norton and David M. Olson (London: Frank Cass, 1996), 161–92; Remington and Smith, "The Development of Parliamentary Parties in Russia," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (1995): 457–89; Remington, "A Socialist Pluralism of Opinions: Glasnost and Policy-Making Under Gorbachev," *Russian Review* 48, no. 3 (1989): 271–304, repr. in *The Soviet System in Crisis*, ed. Alexander Dallin and Gail Lapidus (Boulder: Westview, 1991, 1992), Remington, "Renegotiating Soviet Federalism: Glasnost and Regional Autonomy," *Publius* 19, no. 3 (1989): 145–65; Remington, "Federalism and Segmented Communication in the USSR," *Publius* 15, no. 4 (1985): 113–32; Remington, "Politics and Professionalism in Soviet Journalism," *Slavic Review* 44, no. 3 (1985): 489–503; Remington, "Soviet Public Opinion and the Effectiveness of Party Ideological Work," *Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies*, no. 204 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1983); and Remington, "Policy Innovation and Soviet Media Campaigns," *Journal of Politics* 45, no. 1 (1983): 220–27.

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