

# NOTES ON A SOVIET VISIT

*Mary Jean Pew*

I am aware that a short visit to any country allows for only the most superficial kinds of observations. For a Western visitor, conclusions about the Soviet Union, after short visits to the major cities of western Russia, must be highly tentative, since little in our cultural, ideological and political experiences prepares us for an objective assessment of the Soviet Union. But even if personal objectivity were possible, adequate data is impossible to acquire. I found that the constant efforts of Intourist and others to provide an "official" view, an "official" explanation, an "official" insight into the Soviet people, their motivations and desires, compounded the difficulties. The visitor sees and hears what "they" want you to; exceptions to this, the most fruitful part of my trip, were hard to come by.

Knowledge of Soviet space achievements, missile developments, medical research left me unprepared for what appears to be a grimly primitive daily life existence of the Soviet citizen. Judging by the visible aspects of life there, the undoubted technological capacities of the Soviets have yet to be mobilized for the improvement in goods and services necessary for a less austere existence. From the small town of Byborg north of Leningrad, through the country and major cities of western Russia to Lvov on the Polish border, one sees little that indicates an advanced technological capacity in the Soviets at all. The subway systems in Leningrad and Moscow are indeed impressive, if ornate, and more importantly, serviceable, efficient and cheap. But that about exhausts possible examples of success in directing technological prowess towards the bettering of Soviet life.

The major highway connecting the cities I visited in western Russia is a narrow two-lane road over which traffic is fairly heavy, in part because of tourist buses and foreign visitors, but also because of the numerous horse-drawn transports or old trucks carrying farm workers and equipment. To a non-experienced eye the farm equipment looked extremely crude and simple, a far cry from what one sees in midwestern United States. While the major streets in Leningrad and Moscow are wide, the automobile traffic is light, apparently because automobiles are too expensive for the average Russian family.

The public buildings, especially the seven massive structures put up in Moscow during the Stalin period,

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Mary Jean Pew is associate professor of government at Immaculate Heart College, Los Angeles.

are at best unimaginative and at worst ugly. A major exception to this categorical (and possibly unfair) judgment is the Palace of Congresses in the Moscow Kremlin, erected for the 22nd Party Congress; this is a beautiful modern, well-equipped structure, surpassing much of what has been done in the United States on the same order. With that exception, however, the construction in progress or just completed is dreary, particularly the apartment construction around Moscow and Leningrad, of which there is a great deal. (The apartment construction in Warsaw and East Berlin, by contrast, is startling; some very attractive building is going on there.) And one hates to see the Soviets repeating the same mistakes the United States has made in much of its public housing construction.

The same limited mobilization of skills and energies for major public works is evident in the realm of consumer goods production. Much has been written in the past few years on the increasing emphasis the Soviets are giving to production and distribution of consumer items, but so far their success is not visible to the Western observer. The limited choices available in stores and markets manifest poor workmanship and poorer materials; what is available is generally more expensive than similar items in the United States. Measured by pre-revolutionary standards, and perhaps by those of even ten years ago, there might be some improvement in quality and quantity of goods. It is also true that a non-capitalist social system is not geared to the creation of artificial needs, so the Russians may not want what the Westerner, particularly the American, regards as necessary. But the minimal satisfaction of needs does make life unnecessarily difficult and it certainly fails to reflect what one would hope for from a society with the population, wealth and resources of the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union is making a major effort to develop tourism as an industry. Individuals and groups are encouraged to visit the country and to enjoy the scenery, health resorts, hunting, sea cruises and camping facilities. Hotel construction, badly needed, is on the increase and the number of foreign visitors almost tripled between 1956 and 1966. To provide for the comfortable enjoyment of the country the required services of Intourist, the official state travel agency, are made available. In many ways these services are indispensable. Without the Intourist guides for those who speak no Russian the language barrier would be almost insurmountable and hotel facilities would be impossible to arrange, particularly on long trips through small towns where hotels are really scarce. But that is their major contribution unfortunately, and in many ways Intourist prevents the gaining of new insights into what must be a multifaceted society.

But complexity or ambiguity rarely cloud the picture of Soviet life and history as presented by Intourist. The official explanation of anything comes through as incredibly simple, naive, and by the end of the trip, totally predictable. Clichés abound and no attempt is made at a sophisticated form of indoctrination, not to speak of education of the visitor. "Is there any nationalist movement still existing in the Ukraine?" "No, since the Revolution we have been one big happy family." (direct quote) "Wasn't Lvov at one time Polish?" "Yes, but it *came to* Russia in 1939." (another direct quote) Whatever difficulties there might be in explaining the political realities of the Ukraine or of Lvov from the Soviet point of view (to cite just two examples), a little imagination and a more serious study of history could produce something more believable and sensitive than the current explanations.

A more profitable use of Intourist would be to increase conversations with Soviet citizens, party members as well as non-party members. This kind of contact contributes much to the genuine enlightenment of the visitor and does more to deepen respect for the Russians and their aspirations than most of the existing indoctrination. In Leningrad, a woman computer expert; in Novgorod, a Soviet technician who had worked on the Aswan Dam; in Kiev, a married couple, both engineers and both members of the Communist Party — the most honest and fruitful conversations I had were with them, and these conversations came about totally without the help of Intourist.

With the major exception of Leningrad, what the tourist does see in the Soviet Union is very much out of the country's pre-revolutionary past. In Leningrad the fascinating revolutionary events do dominate, and it is consequently a stimulating city. But every place else one is shown numerous churches, museums, and art collections (largely pre-revolutionary fortunately; the social realistic post-revolutionary art is depressingly unimaginative). What the unofficial visitor is shown in the Moscow Kremlin, for example, are the five churches, some in process of restoration, and a museum of items from Czarist Russia, i.e. gowns worn by the Czarinas, jewels, crown, armor, guns, etc. The excessive preoccupation of Intourist with the churches may be a tactic to convince the Western visitor that the official atheism of the country does not preclude appreciation of the artistic and cultural influences of the Russian Orthodox Church. On the whole, emphasis on the past may reflect a deeper effort by the Soviets to establish a continuity with Czarist Russia not simply as justification of the 1917 events but also because of the validity and importance of those centuries. Whatever the reasons, apart from the monuments to Lenin which abound, the visitor sees much

more of Russian history than of Soviet achievements.

What of the intellectual life? The Soviets have not resolved the Marxian dilemma of class identification for the intellectuals. A current Intourist publication reads: "The Soviet society consists of two friendly classes. There are the working class and the collective farm peasantry. Somewhere between them there are intellectuals who form a social stratum." In spite of classification difficulties, an encouraging aspect of present Soviet interest is the emphasis on education, particularly higher education. The universities in Leningrad, Moscow and Kiev have large enrollments and an enviable student-faculty ratio, judging by Intourist figures. And evidently they are quite reputable academic institutions, within of course the limitations imposed by Communist ideology. One hears little of academic freedom, but even without recognition of that value, the academic programs in science, mathematics, engineering and languages seem quite thorough, judging from rather fragmentary evidence. Indeed, one encounters far more Russians who can speak English than one does Americans with comparable ability in Russian. One does wish, however, that there was unrestricted access to magazines and newspapers from the United States or from the West in general; it is difficult to believe that the availability of the international *Herald Tribune* on the streets in Moscow would seriously undermine the Soviet state.

The educational achievements, the kindness and hospitality of the Russian people towards visitors, the good will continually manifest in so many ways do not offset an overall impression of failure of imagination and creativity on the part of current Soviet leadership. I longed for evidence of more plurality, diversity, choice on all levels; a few Russian hippies, some experimental films, literature, plays would do much to counteract the impression of sameness and a resulting joylessness that a Western visitor leaves with. More fundamentally one longs for a climate of political diversity; for a Soviet counterpart of the Young Americans for Freedom, Students for a Democratic Society, Black Panthers or a John Birch Society — anything to break the deadly monotony of pictures of Lenin, simplistic exhortations, political uniformity.

Undoubtedly the life of the Russian is better than before the revolution. But is that enough to justify the foreclosing of so many options, the stifling of imagination, the limitations of political choice that mark the current Soviet scene? The little evidence of human priorities in the hierarchy of values negates all the rhetoric of the current leadership. The Russian people deserve better and Karl Marx deserves better. Nothing indicates that the Soviet Union today is on the path to the Marxian utopia; he is yet to be tried.