

Olympic preparations had progressed somewhat, but pride was clearly lacking this year

With the Soviet Man on the Street

BY RONALD R. POPE

Soviet relations with much of the world, and with the United States in particular, are clearly at a low ebb, a fact underlined at the beginning of my most recent trip to the Soviet Union in May. Soviet Customs, always suspicious of Americans, searched the luggage of our Citizens Exchange Corps-sponsored group much more thoroughly than that of the group I had led the previous year. Still, this was the only significant manifestation of Soviet ire we encountered during our stay in the USSR.

Despite its initial unpleasantness, the trip turned out to be worthwhile. There were numerous opportunities for extended informal discussions with our Soviet counterparts. Such encounters are a major part of all trips organized by the Citizen Exchange Corps, whose primary interest is in fostering person-to-person contacts between Americans and Soviets. I was particularly interested in informal views on the Olympic boycott, Afghanistan, and U.S.-Soviet relations.

Signs of the Summer Olympics were everywhere in Leningrad, Moscow, and Kiev, three of the four cities we visited. Compared with the previous year, noticeable progress has been made in preparing for the Games. Almost all of the scaffolding was off St. Basil's

Cathedral in Red Square; its colorful, refurbished domes were more striking than ever. But a number of historic buildings still had not been cleaned, and—even in the absence of labor unrest in this workers' state—there was work yet to be done on all the major game facilities. Neither were all the hotels ready for the hundreds of thousands of expected guests.

As is invariably the case in the Soviet Union, much of the workmanship is of inferior quality by Western standards. One young member of our group who had worked in construction remarked that the Soviet bricklayers, whose work he observed, were much too careless to be allowed into an American union. Cracks were already appearing in buildings not yet completed.

I was told that Moscow would soon be closed to all visitors, Soviet and foreign, to facilitate the last-minute clean-up. An effort was obviously already under way to curtail contact between the less desirable elements of Soviet society and foreign visitors. Fewer drunks were visible on the streets than in the past, and in Leningrad and Moscow we were accosted less frequently by black marketeers. Police were reportedly cracking down especially hard in these two cities; even the young boys who invariably want to trade Soviet lapel pins for chewing gum were less in evidence.

Particularly odd, in view of all the preparations and propaganda, was the seeming lack of enthusiasm for the upcoming Games. The previous year our group had been asked often if we intended to return for the 1980

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Olympics. There was an obvious note of pride in those questions, but pride was clearly lacking this year. I was told that many Russians are fed up with the overbearing government propaganda and that there is also resentment over the diversion of labor and materials from housing and other consumer needs to Olympic facilities, many of which will be of only limited use to Soviet citizens after the Games. (For instance, Russians are not allowed to enter freely hotels catering to foreign tourists or to use the restaurants, shops, and other facilities built and stocked with Soviet resources.)

Some disgust was also evident at the system's continued failure to perform as efficiently as the government claims it does. In Kiev I overheard one young mother disdainfully remark that the Olympic hotel across from where we sat was still unfinished. I was told that among the relatively few people who were truly looking forward to the event were those who expected to find in the stores a good supply of usually scarce consumer goods. This was anticipated as part of the official effort to show the world how well the Soviet system is working. However, my informant noted, these goods would of course disappear immediately after the Games.

Although the Olympic boycott was not mentioned as often as I had expected, it undoubtedly was contributing to the lack of enthusiasm. One Russian was heard to ask an acquaintance: "Why bother with the Olympics when our American friends aren't coming?" When the boycott was discussed—officially and unofficially—the Russians invariably argued that it was wrong for the Carter administration to mix sports and politics. Even those inclined to be critical of their government's foreign policy felt that the boycott would serve no useful purpose. One person reminded me of Russian stubbornness and suggested that the boycott guaranteed that Soviet troops would remain in Afghanistan at least until the Olympics were over.

According to both the Soviet press and the semi-official spokesmen we met, there is only a "limited contingent" of Soviet troops in Afghanistan engaged primarily in peaceful assistance to the Afghan people. Further, they were asked to enter the country by the government in Kabul in response to a threat from "third parties," and they are being warmly welcomed by the majority of the people. Finally, the troops will be withdrawn shortly.

the country. Everyone with whom I talked believed, or at least honestly hoped, that they would be withdrawn soon. There was an obvious lack of appreciation, even on the part of those generally critical of Soviet policy, of the extent of Afghan resistance. The Soviet Government seems to have put itself into something of a "propaganda box." The claim of a limited contingent of troops warmly welcomed by the people of Afghanistan makes significant casualties difficult to explain. At the same time, by refusing to publish credible data, the Soviet leaders have provided grist for the rumor mills. One young man said that he'd heard some sixteen thousand Soviet soldiers had already been killed in Afghanistan. The Western press, in contrast, had reported at that time no more than two thousand dead.

There is genuine fear of war in the Soviet Union. The country has still not fully recovered, either physically or psychologically, from the destruction of World War II. At the time of the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in the spring of 1979, some of those who had lived through the worst periods of the last war began to prepare dried bread. Even many young people were greatly concerned.

Soviet involvement in Afghanistan is not the only thing that irritates the average Russian. There is every indication that the Soviet economy will continue to be inefficient and, as a result, will fail to meet consumer expectations. One young man remarked that because of the poor supply and quality of goods available in the stores, many Russians try to get jobs with enterprises that produce items worth stealing. Such stealing, however, undermines productivity, creating still more economic problems. In this connection the decision to fill the stores for the Olympics may backfire. It will be hard for many Russians to accept business as usual once they have seen what might be available for purchase. Young people will be particularly bitter, since they have no personal knowledge of the great hardships endured during the Second World War, while their parents and grandparents are usually grateful for today's relative abundance.

In the long run the inefficiency of the Soviet economy may do more to undermine international prestige than the Olympic boycott or even a major setback in Afghanistan. [VVV]

THE PROPAGANDA BOX

The less official the conversation, the greater variations one was likely to hear. Interestingly enough, though, those professionally engaged in international relations research and teaching, who should be the most critical and best informed, seemed genuinely to want to believe most of the official propaganda. They had their greatest trouble identifying the legal authorities who had requested Soviet military assistance. When pressed, they claimed it was a faction within the Afghan Government led by Babrak Karmal. They had no good answer when it was pointed out that at the time of the coup Karmal was not in the government but, in fact, in exile in Czechoslovakia.

One of the most important questions with regard to Afghanistan is how long Soviet troops will remain in