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## Travelogue

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# A hot, bitter summer in Moscow

by Larissa Grigorenko and Karl Heine

Moscow, end of July 1990. Seeing Moscow today—crossing it on foot, by metro, by bus and tram, the vast stretches of this huge metropolis, and talking to scores of people from all walks of life—is not the same Moscow as during the Brezhnev years, nor that of even two years ago.

What we saw was more than a city, more than a people. We became eyewitnesses to history, to what one can only describe as a revolution in the making. Had we not seen things with our own eyes and heard with our own ears, we would never have believed what we did hear and see.

Why revolution? The Russians have lost their fear. What strikes you most is that the Russians, and those of all other ethnic groups living in Moscow—a sort of cosmopolitan microcosm of Soviet society—all speak out, in the open. They say what's on their mind about the “communist paradise” they are still forced to live under, about their leaders, about the KGB, about the Church, about their miserable living conditions. They openly express themselves, often in quite loud and colorful language, and are no longer afraid. The fear of punishment, of being brought in for questioning, of arrest, imprisonment, loss of job, whatever—all this has vanished. In front of or around other people one can find Muscovites loudly denouncing and cursing the system, the *apparatchiki*, the “privileged class,” meaning the party and government members of the hated ruling caste, the *Nomenklatura*, the state and the mafia. Pamphlets and leaflets can be bought for a ruble or two (expensive for Russian standards because of persistent paper shortages) claiming to have the goods on “Who is Raisa Gorbachova, Really?” and “Read All About Mikhail Gorbachov's Lifestyle.”

Popular patience is wearing thin, given the worsening lack of tangible results during the five years of perestroika. People, seething with anger because of the severe shortages of meat, fresh fruit and vegetables, cigarettes and paper, would tell you: “We work hard, and all we hear is talk and promises. We work hard and we can buy nothing. Yet prices have gone up. Things are not better, but worse for us.” We were also shocked to find that the selection of consumer goods at Moscow's largest state department store “GUM” is

of worse quality and taste than at your average “Polish” flea market in West Berlin.

For the most part, the Muscovites, as the July 15 mass demonstration showed, are pinning their hopes on the more radical populist types, such as the newly elected Russian Federation President Boris Yeltsin, Moscow Mayor Gavriil Popov, ex-KGB Major General Oleg Kalugin, et al., who “tell it like it is”; but even that can change, we were told, to an even more radical direction, if the city's shops continue to display bare shelves. “The system is in agony . . . in its death-phase,” said one musician. “There is a wave of mass exodus from the party. . . . In our Conservatory only the director is left holding the party membership card.”

### State and mafia

We didn't expect to be eyewitnesses to a situation hovering on the brink of a revolution. Of course, soon before our arrival, we had read about that Moscow demonstration of “hundreds of thousands” on July 15, and remembered that these people had carried banners calling for the abolition of the privileged class in society, and of all its privileges. During our stay, one of us had mentioned how wonderful it was that “hundreds of thousands” had demonstrated. “What do you mean hundreds of thousands?” interrupted one Russian. “We were one million—one million, you understand? That was a day. And there will be more. Things can't go on this way.”

We arrived at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport, and, after quickly clearing customs, got our first glimpse of the combination that runs the Soviet Union, what Muscovites commonly refer to as “state and mafia,” which not accidentally is meant to make fun of Lenin's standard work, *State and Revolution*. We were carrying our bags, after having cleared customs, when around the exits there they were, state and mafia: the uniformed men of the customs, and meters away, the black market currency changers. From out of the corners and shadows, Russians emerged, searching out tourists, offering black market rates for dollars, for deutsche-marks, offering rates for a taxi ride into Moscow—to be paid in hard currency, of course.

## In search of food

Arrival in Moscow. A beautiful city with great potential. Wide boulevards—majestically wide, so wide they make the famous wide boulevards of Paris appear like almost side streets in comparison. The streets are extremely clean, spotless. I have seen nearly every large city on the European continent, and I have to say, some of them are clean, but none approach the Moscow standard of cleanliness. The old buildings like the Pushkin Museum or the Tretyakov Gallery are impressive, but many are in need of renovation. Disrepair is everywhere.

The true measure of a city is how the daily existence of its citizens proceeds. What we saw was appalling, tragic, unforgettable. Moscow is a city of millions—over 8.5 million inhabitants—always on the move, especially from the hours of 4:00 p.m., when work for the day stops, to 8:00 in the evening when the shops close. These millions move, in waves, in hordes, from shop to shop, from one part of the city to another, by metro, by bus, whatever, always, and in a frenzied state, in search of food and other necessities.

Everyone has heard about the incredibly long queues at the Moscow “food shops.” The long queues are an ugly true fact of daily life. The term “food shop” is misleading. The person in the West automatically thinks of some equivalent of a supermarket, or some store which sells certain genres of food. Nothing of the sort exists in Moscow; there are no “food shops.” There are shops for each type of food. To shop, one must endure a long queue in front of the shop that sells milk, then the shop that sells bread, then the shop that sells meat, the shop that sells fruit and vegetables, and so on—a never-ending nightmare. The search for scarce food goes on, day after day, many times, seven days a week. Often Sundays, too, become workdays for many shops and enterprises if the monthly plans are not fulfilled. And due to the scarcity of goods and raw materials, this is almost always the case, we were told.

Everyone we spoke to said that the shortages have never been worse. Meat is now totally unavailable in the shops. Even the most mobile of Muscovites, the taxi driver, cannot find a shop with meat. One taxi driver told us he had stopped by 15 meat shops in a single day and found absolutely nothing. The story with fruits and vegetables is just as dismal. The anger of the people is very close to exploding. The peak of summer is the one time of year when fruits and vegetables, otherwise scarce throughout the year, are normally available in the cities, especially in the capital, Moscow. Not so this year, at least not for the hard-working ordinary citizen.

## The class society

No such problems confront the members of the privileged class. As tourists, armed with dollars and deutschemarks, we were able to go to the handful of good restaurants, open only to foreigners and the *Nomenklatura* or their offspring. We did not do this for snobbish reasons. We had actually tried

to emulate the ordinary Muscovites and eat at the snack bars and “cafés” that exist for the *hoi polloi*. The actual sight of these places, close-up, changed our minds. The sanitary conditions were appalling. And if you’re thirsty you go to a coin-operated soda machine, where, as in the West, you put a cup underneath, insert a coin, push a button, and the soft drink pours into the cup. The problem was not the equipment. It was the “cup,” a glass cup, and the *only* one to be had. As soon as a customer would finish his or her drink, the glass cup was *rinsed* with water, not washed, because there was *no soap* (the severe shortages of soap, detergent, and disposable containers responsible for such unsanitary atrocities still persist), and passed on to the next customer. That typified what the man on the street has to put up with.

We went to one of the best restaurants in Moscow, the “Paha,” just off of the Arbat, one of the oldest parts of the city, today a pre-1970s Greenwich Village-style, or Paris Latin Quarter youth scene, which gained international attention through Rybakov’s controversial book, *Children of Arbat*. Entering the restaurant we found class society in action. To get in, either you must look like you are from the *Nomenklatura*, or a Westerner with *valyuta* (hard currency, meaning dollars or deutschemarks). Aside from the portier, there are a dozen mean-looking bouncers to make sure this rule is not

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violated. Once inside, there was no doubt that this was a restaurant for the *Nomenklatura*. The Russians we saw there were not only rich, but flaunting how rich they were: The most expensive and exquisite clothing—yes, a fashion show, that would put the *schicki-mickis* of Germany to shame.

We had seen first-hand what the population curses as the “*spets class*” (*spets* is an abbreviation for “special”)—special as in special privileges; special restaurants; special food shops, while the ordinary people get by with no meat or fruit and vegetables; special hospitals with the latest equipment and medicines, while even aspirin is no longer available in the pharmacies; special holiday resorts, trips to the West; special dachas, and so on.

What communism has created is the worst, most despicable class society anywhere. The greatest contrast perhaps was the scene around the Hotel Rossiya, a fancy Moscow hotel for the native *Nomenklatura*. Nearby, almost in front of it, an encampment of Moscow’s homeless in self-erected plastic tents. The pensioners, invalids, and others who can no longer get by on low fixed incomes came to protest in the capital city. The old *babushka* holding a placard which read “Mikhail Gorbachov, We Are Awaiting Your Reply,” told us after finding out we were tourists from the Federal Republic of Germany: “Take pictures and show to the world outside how the system treats the old, poor, and unemployed.” Among the homeless was an unemployed factory worker with wife, child, and dog forced out into the rain and cold. By night that evening, the temperature had dropped to 10-12°C (50-53°F).

In every conversation, without exception, what struck us so much was the support for and happiness over Germany being united again as a nation. The Russian on the street sees this as his great hope. Mixed with this, as one Ukrainian patriot living in Moscow stressed, is the hope that the West will help the people, but not the system: “The West must make the kind of accords that allow the ideology to collapse, and not support it.” He continued: “The best thing was Reagan with the SDI [Strategic Defense Initiative]. That really scared them. The system is at the precipice. One of Reagan’s biggest mistakes was to stop it; he slowed it down too much. The SDI would have forced the system to fall. They need Western help, and we and the Baltic need sovereignty. That’s the mistake of the West, again in the Baltic. Support Baltic and Ukrainian independence, do not be afraid. Moscow needs the West.”

He was talking in the middle of a crowded room. We asked him: “Aren’t you afraid to talk so openly about bringing the system down?” His answer: “Why, everyone talks like this now. What can they do? Arrest 10, 20, 50 million?” He wasn’t exaggerating. As we saw in our days in Moscow, everyone talks like this.

A revolution is coming, and soon, unless things change. But the very scale on which they must change to prevent a revolution would itself amount to a revolution.

## Will Moscow legalize drugs?

by Muriel Mirak

Since the historic Kohl-Gorbachov talks in the Caucasus, most people both East and West have been trying to imagine what Russia will look like, once it has adopted Western technologies and modes of production. The center of debate in the West is the question of which type of Western economic policy the Soviets should follow: the Listian approach, which could replicate the process of rapid industrialization we went through in the last century; or the monetarist version, favored in London and Washington, which concentrates on “buying cheap and selling dear,” i.e., speculative profit per se.

It seems there are some even in Moscow who are toying with the latter alternative; in fact, one organization has come into being which is proposing the legalization of narcotics—the biggest profit maker which has the most devastating economic effect on both producer and consumer. Believe it or not, an international conference was held at the Moscow Institute for Historian-Archivists, to debate whether or not dope should become a legal product on the free market to be set up in Russia. According to a report appearing in the Soviet magazine *New Times* (No. 30, 1990), top names in the international legalization lobby, such as Arnold Trebach and Italy’s Sen. Lorenzo Strik Lievers, gave their audience, mainly composed of young people, the usual pitch on legalization: that prohibition, whether of alcohol or drugs, is the reason why narcotics prices are so high; that such immense profits make it impossible to dissuade the poor from pushing drugs; that law enforcement efforts are expensive and futile. Trebach, who is the president of the U.S. Drug Policy Foundation, which pushes for a drug-controlled police state, demagogically warned that “the imposition of harsher sentences for drug users . . . threatens to lead to the creation of a police state in the most democratic country in the West.”

Conclusion? Trebach and Lievers proposed that the Soviet Union legalize drugs, on the Dutch model, complete with free distribution of needles (to “deal with such frightening enemies as AIDS”), the breakup of organized crime, and the reduction of market prices. The two Western drug apologists also called for expanding one of the key lobbies in the West, the Radical Party, which has now become transnational.

And the Soviet response? According to Konstantin Isakov, writing for *New Times*, “So far some 260 Soviets have responded to the call, forming the active core of the party in the Soviet Union.” The article continues: “It is possible that the idea of the legalization of drugs is not all that bad. But