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Research in the Soviet Union Under Glasnost

THEOPHILUS C. PROUSIS

I will never forget the mandatory AIDS test I took in the clinic at Leningrad State University. Long lines in the dark corridor, paint peeling off the walls, thick dust on the unwashed floor, and contradictory instructions from young nurses in long white coats all made the ordeal a time for reflection. Did I make the right decision coming to the Soviet Union? Was I sufficiently steeled for the realities of Soviet life? Upon arrival in Leningrad in September 1987, our group, consisting of four exchange scholars embarking on a nine-month research trip, was tested under the guidelines of a new Soviet law instituting mandatory AIDS testing for all foreigners who were not tourists. I worried because of reports of high false-positive rates in Soviet testing procedures. My anxiety intensified when I learned that Soviet doctors frequently used the same needle more than once. Armed with our own needles procured from an American doctor at the U.S. consulate, we survived the test. Since I never heard anything from the clinic, I presumably passed.

The AIDS test set the tone for my year in the Soviet Union. It was one of many obstacles, both expected and unexpected, that had to be endured with a sense of humor and a sense of perspective. It underscored the importance of preparing myself as much as possible to confront these obstacles on my own terms. The episode also provided insight into the somewhat less than efficient workings of a cumbersome Soviet bureaucracy. Above all, exposure to Soviet medical practice reinforced one of my basic goals for the year: stay healthy and out of Soviet clinics.

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I spent the 1987–88 academic year in the USSR with a grant from the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) to conduct historical research in Soviet archives and libraries. IREX, with government, corporate, and foundation support, administers research exchange programs with the Soviet Union and the socialist countries of Eastern Europe in the fields of the social sciences and the humanities. I had been in the USSR during 1980 and 1981, at a time when East-West tensions were high as a result of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, President Carter's grain embargo and boycott of the Moscow Olympics, and the Solidarity movement in Poland. On that visit, when I was a graduate student at the University of Minnesota, my IREX grant allowed me to research my dissertation on Russian public responses to the Greek Revolution of the 1820s. On this recent trip, at a time when East-West tensions had thawed, I had the opportunity to note the effects of General Secretary Gorbachev's policy of glasnost, or openness, on Western scholars in the Soviet Union.

Leningrad, where I conducted most of my research, brings to mind the national classics of Pushkin, Gogol, and Dostoyevski. It is unlike any other city in the Soviet Union. Leningrad charms and fascinates because of its blend of Russian and Western European architecture, its prominence as the capital of the czarist empire, and its position as the birthplace of modern Russian culture and the epicenter of revolution. But on this trip I would be able to observe how effectively Gorbachev could blend Soviet realities and Western ideas. When I arrived in Leningrad, my immediate goal was to establish an efficient work routine as soon as possible. I was convinced, based on my previous experience,

that devising a daily and weekly rhythm was the best way I could cope with Soviet realities. As much as I had prepared myself for the second trip, I discovered that some things in the Soviet Union do not change, glasnost or no glasnost: adjusting to Soviet life is still a jarring experience demanding time and patience.

For example, I shared a ten-by-twelve-foot dormitory room with Vasilii, a sleepy-eyed, scrawny, and unkempt Soviet graduate student of linguistics and French. He had to get the approval of a Party commission for the honor, or task, of sharing a room with a Westerner. While I doubt he was actually *paid* to watch me, Vasilii had the responsibility of finding out as much as he could about my activities in the Soviet Union. He seemed particularly interested in the identity of my Soviet friends and acquaintances and the nature of my relations with them. I had the uncomfortable feeling that I was living with a spy. Except, of course, I was supposed to be the spy.

Vasilii had an unobtrusive approach to monitoring me. He never pestered me with questions about my comings and goings and never, to my knowledge, tampered with my belongings, notes, or mail. I was generally discreet in our conversations, parrying his comments with safe remarks about my research and the well-preserved historical landmarks of his beloved Leningrad. We were able to develop a reasonably cordial relationship despite his dogmatic party-line stance on most issues, such as his belief that United States news coverage of the USSR was saturated with anti-Soviet propaganda and misinformation. Vasilii was genuinely curious about American life, especially consumer goods, plying me with questions about the cost and availability of cars, stereos, televisions, computers, even cigarettes, which he smoked in the stairwell because smoking was prohibited in the room. What most annoyed me about Vasilii was his almost constant presence. He became such a fixture in the room, reading French mystery novels and loudly playing Phil Collins, Billy Joel, and Edith Piaf tapes, that my daily rhythm seemed a bit out of sync the few times he went to Volgograd to visit his wife, two children, and parents.

We lived on the fifth floor of a light gray, nondescript, five-story dormitory without an elevator. Each floor had communal kitchen

and washroom facilities, but the two communal phones and the only showers were on the first floor. Life in Club Len, the name Westerners affectionately gave to this dreary place, had many austere and, to Americans, unusual aspects. Take, for example, my key. It was in fact *our* key—Vasilii's and mine. Because there was only one key per room, whoever left last (usually Vasilii) deposited it at a glass-enclosed office on the first floor; whoever returned first (usually Vasilii) retrieved it. Sometimes I wondered if he ever went out. The keys had very little to do with privacy or protection of private property, as I came to learn. My key opened almost every room in the building. Sometimes my key opened every room *but* mine. If privacy was non-existent at Club Len, so too was sanitation. Monday was "sanitary day," a day when the shower room was locked for cleaning and sanitizing. From what I could gather the next day, sanitizing had simply consisted of opening the windows and letting the drafty air circulate.

Life in Club Len also had its endearing aspects that provided vivid insight into Soviet life. The dormitory was located in what was chiefly a working-class neighborhood, the scene of barricades in 1905 and 1917. The area's drab apartment blocks and dirty snow stood in sharp contrast to the magical Leningrad of the Neva Embankment, the Bronze Horseman, and Rastrelli's Winter Palace. The stores and shops around Club Len featured the standard Soviet three-line shopping system: one line to select an item (say, a loaf of bread), another to pay the cashier, and a third to exchange the receipt for the now-packaged item. Deep puddles of thick mud and slush near the doors added an extra hurdle to the three-line endurance contest. Some of the longest shopping lines were for sugar, a result of Gorbachev's anti-alcohol campaign. Whereas in 1980 I had often brought a bottle of wine to the homes of Soviet friends, in 1988 a thoughtful guest would bring a three-pound bag of sugar. Sugar became scarce in state stores because it was purchased in bulk quantities for illegal home-distilled spirits. The people responded by turning the endemic shortages of basic consumer items into jokes. For example—What would happen if the Soviet Union acquired the Sahara Desert? Answer: In a few years, sand would be in short supply.

One of my favorite places in the neighborhood was the Smolensk cemetery, a heavily wooded area with two small picturesque Russian churches. The cemetery was an island of serenity, not just for the departed, but for the living as well. Many people strolled along the birch-lined paths, quietly chatting, while others went cross-country skiing. Jogging here each morning, I discovered the Polar Bear Club, whose members ran bare-chested during the winter, even with the temperature at fifteen below.

Our neighborhood had other advantages as well. Absent were the aggressive black marketeers who prey upon Westerners in the center of the city, especially near major hotels and on Nevskii Prospekt. With my monthly stipend of 380 rubles (about \$500), I had more than enough rubles to live on and, thus, no need to exchange dollars for rubles at black-market rates well above the official one. Astonished by the extremely lucrative rates of currency exchange on the black market, I was often reminded of the Soviet joke: In Soviet economics, the relationship between the ruble, the dollar, and the pound is constant. A pound of rubles is always equal to a dollar. When approached by black marketeers on Nevskii Prospekt, in self-defense I pretended to be deaf, a strategy that usually confused the hustlers. On other occasions, I played along, telling them I could get better deals from their competitors across the street. An American colleague had still another effective technique: he recited e. e. cummings's poems to them. I always felt a sense of relief walking the quiet streets in the area of the dormitory because I knew I did not have to face that army of black marketeers.

Having coffee every morning at a local shop near the dorm gave me a sense of working-class attitudes toward perestroika, Gorbachev's effort to restructure the economy and bureaucracy. Whenever the plump, middle-aged woman serving coffee heard excerpts from Gorbachev's speeches on the morning news, urging citizens to work longer and harder for the good of the country, she responded by shouting at the radio that people like herself had worked hard all their lives and that Gorbachev and Raisa were out of touch with the average working man and woman. Conversations with Vasilii and other graduate students provided still a different slant on public opinion. They generally sup-

ported the reform initiatives, in particular the liberalizing effects of glasnost on the intellectual and cultural life and on the historical reinterpretation of the Stalin era. Articles in the press, films like *Repentance*, and novels like Anatoli Rybakov's *Children of the Arbat* depicted the abuses of power under Stalin more candidly and truthfully than anything produced during the Brezhnev era.

Adjusting to life with Vasilii in Club Len and its environs came with time, perseverance, and no little flexibility on my part. Within several weeks, I started to feel as though I belonged, a feeling dramatically reinforced late that December. When the U.S. Press and Cultural Affairs Attaché and his wife went to Helsinki for a few days before Christmas, they asked me to house-sit in their sprawling five-room apartment on Gogol Street, adjoining the bustling and glitzy Nevskii Prospekt in the heart of Leningrad. From their apartment windows I gazed upon a steady stream of people trudging back and forth in snow, sleet, and slush, carrying string bags and packages with objects bulging in all directions, much like the multi-shaped domes on St. Basil's in Red Square. People were also standing in lines for Soviet New Year's cards, colorful and vibrant with scenes from Russian fairy tales and folk legends for this festive season when Father Frost becomes the Soviet version of Santa Claus.

Inside the apartment, I was ensconced with two cats, a decorated Christmas tree, a VCR, several stereo systems with a wide selection of tapes and records, and numerous well-stocked shelves of novels, historical works, and art books from all over the world. By far the most precious and treasured items were the washer and dryer, the first I had seen since my arrival in Peter the Great's "Window to the West." For two days I felt a million miles away from my reality of the past four months. But it turned out to be one of the most bizarre episodes of the year. The apartment, an island of Western life, and the dormitory, a living experience that bordered on a prolonged dreary camping trip, represented two completely different patterns of life. In fact, I was glad to return to Club Len and resume the daily rituals and routines of my Soviet life. For that, after all, was the real Soviet Union.

I was there to research Russian-Greek cultural relations and the Greek communities of Russia. Before I could begin, I had to com-

plete several bureaucratic procedures at Leningrad State University, the institution where I was placed. Writing the research proposal loomed as the most vital step of this preparatory stage. In 1980, I regarded the proposal as yet another bureaucratic formality to be completed as quickly as possible in order to begin my research. In 1987, I fully realized that the proposal was an indispensable document, a passport into academic and research institutions. It signified my seriousness as a historian, something the Soviets deeply respect when it comes time to securing archival materials.

The art of crafting a good proposal requires a deft combination of the general and the specific. Besides addressing the specific research issues I intended to explore, my proposal had to be sufficiently broad to encompass tangential topics that developed during the course of the year. My proposal listed each specific archival and manuscript reference I would need and included the key phrase "and any other materials relevant to my work." This became a much-needed safety net for requesting sources not specifically cited. Had I not included this phrase, I would have been denied access to anything not explicitly listed. Flexibility, therefore, became a major consideration in preparing my research agenda.

After the research proposal was approved and signed by my Soviet adviser, a professor of nineteenth-century Russian history at Leningrad State University, I believed everything was in order and was eager to begin my work. But soon I was reminded that the most basic reality of Soviet life is to expect the unexpected because the unexpected generally happens. At the Manuscript Section of the Institute of Russian Literature, my placement papers had not been received or processed, while at the Central State Historical Archive and the Manuscript Section of the Saltykov-Shchedrin Library, my status was "pending approval from the Main Archival Administration in Moscow." With patience, persistence, innumerable calls on phones that did not always work, and several visits to crowded administrative offices, I was usually successful in overcoming this bureaucratic tug-of-war over archival access.

I initially considered this contest an endurance struggle of sorts, orchestrated by Soviet officials to test the seriousness and perseverance of Western scholars. It seemed carefully

planned to coincide with the early weeks of my stay when I experienced all the frustrations and difficulties of adjusting to Soviet life. After two trips to the Soviet Union, I am now convinced that this confusion about access to archives results from a glacial bureaucracy that refuses to take initiative without permission from Moscow. Gorbachev's concerted effort to streamline and restructure this labyrinthine bureaucracy, while certainly laudable, has spawned even greater confusion and disorganization than before. Various departments and sectors are unsure about the security of their positions and the identity of their new superiors in the bureaucratic hierarchy. Thus, they tend to act more cautiously and tentatively than ever, awaiting explicit directives from Moscow, the hub of the bureaucracy.

During both research trips, I was denied permission to work at the Archive of Russian Foreign Policy in Moscow. Access to this institution has always been a problem for most Western scholars regardless of their research topics. Soviet officials have traditionally been sensitive about czarist and Soviet foreign policy materials, and if more than a select few Westerners can work at this particular archive, it will be one index of glasnost. On both research trips, I was also unable to work at the Manuscript Section of the Lenin Library in Moscow. Once I was denied access because a Soviet scholar was said to be examining the materials I requested. A second denial occurred because, I was told, no record of my placement papers had been processed. Because this archive was "undergoing restoration"—a common Soviet euphemism for an institution that is not functioning but isn't necessarily under restoration—it is likely that my placement documents were lost or misplaced. I did not press the issue because the holdings at this archive were tangentially related to my topic and I had enough other work to keep me occupied.

Most of my archival work was conducted in Leningrad, in particular at the Central State Historical Archive, the most important repository for historical research on nineteenth-century Russia. The Manuscript Section of the Institute of Russian Literature houses the richest manuscript collections of Pushkin, Tolstoy, and other great figures in Russian literature and culture. My status was initially uncertain because the university kept saying

that they had no authorization from Moscow permitting me to work here; but when I went directly to this archive and presented a copy of my research proposal to the assistant director, he could not have been more cooperative. I began working within a few days—perhaps a measure of glasnost on the part of the assistant director. More significant, my proposal listed specific manuscript holdings in the archive and the names of Soviet specialists working there whom I wanted to meet. I was also able to work at the Manuscript Section of the Saltykov-Shchedrin Public Library, but I encountered difficulty obtaining permission to use all the materials I requested. In this particular case, my Soviet adviser tried unsuccessfully to obtain a release for some of these documents.

For several obvious reasons, I received access to far more archival sources on my recent trip than on my previous one. In addition to being more fluent in Russian, I now had my Ph.D. and a university teaching position, both of which enhanced my reputation with Soviet officials and scholars. Being more familiar with the living and working environment, and in particular with the ways to operate effectively within the Kafkaesque world of Soviet officialdom, I had a better sense of how to pursue my research objectives and how to maintain the good will and favorable disposition of key administrators at the university and the archives. Giving tokens of my appreciation on Soviet holidays, such as flowers, chocolates, or hard-to-find books like *Children of the Arbat*, helped solidify a good relationship with the appropriate officials.

Glasnost made a noticeable difference in the quantity and quality of research materials I received. It contributed to the more cordial and positive atmosphere in Soviet institutions, with most archivists and librarians displaying greater support, cooperation, and encouragement than I had found during 1980 and 1981. One measure of the change glasnost brings to American scholars is the greater opportunity to conduct research outside Moscow and Leningrad. In 1980–81, I was refused permission to work in the libraries and archives of Odessa, although that was crucial to my research. The reason bordered on the absurd: “Most of the city,” I was informed, “was undergoing restoration.” In 1988, the city being “open,” I had approval to work in the regional historical archive of Odessa, one

of the highlights of my research. The Odessa segment of my research became especially productive when I came across the personal papers of Dimitrios S. Inglezis, a prominent representative of the Greek community of Odessa in the first half of the nineteenth century. I have since incorporated this rich trove of information in an article on Inglezis, a merchant, city leader, and patriot of Odessa.

My schedule also took advantage of the new opportunities provided by glasnost. In the Central State Historical Archive, where I did most of my research, I established a good working relationship with my archival assistant, Natasha, with whom I had worked for six weeks in 1981. The organization of most Soviet archives does not allow Westerners to examine inventories of specific archival holdings, so Natasha became absolutely indispensable. I had to order materials through her, which entailed informing her about my topic and all related issues I wanted to investigate. Because I maintained regular hours at the archive and kept her abreast of my scheduled research trips to other cities, she provided a regular flow of very useful materials.

On several occasions when the official in the reading room left for a few minutes, I tried to examine the treasured archival inventories that Soviet scholars have the privilege of using. Frantically copying as many citations as possible before the return of the official, I realized that no matter how much material Natasha brought me, she was not forthcoming with all of the relevant files. By mid-year, and in return for several English to Russian translations that she asked me to do, she let me look at some of the inventories—a gold mine of information that enabled me to start new projects. Within the parameters of Soviet archival rules and regulations, Natasha proved to be a very capable, diligent, and pleasant assistant who made my research productive.

Working with unpublished sources is, of course, the very essence of the historian's craft. In the Soviet Union, its special circumstances have to be kept in mind. In nearly all cases, copying facilities for archival materials are extremely difficult to use. I needed special permission from both Natasha and the Main Archival Administration in Moscow, and limits were placed on what and how much could be copied. In libraries, I encountered less difficulty getting things photocopied or micro-filmed, again with limitations on what and

how much. But even here I had to secure permission from a desk clerk who, without even knowing my research interests, sometimes rejected my copy requests because they were "not related to my topic." On the whole, I found it more efficient to examine items and take detailed notes than to make copies for future reference. The time-consuming process of getting permission, the uncertainty of waiting for approved copy requests, and the generally poor quality of Soviet copies were the main reasons I used archival files as they were brought to my shelf. Then I could establish a momentum and begin to see connections between various issues. Using materials as they came in also gave me good leads for placing subsequent orders with Natasha.

Because my historical research concentrated on the pre-Soviet period, most of the archival documents and manuscripts I examined were handwritten, sometimes clearly in large well-scripted letters but more often illegibly in an almost undecipherable scrawl. Before going to the Soviet Union, I consulted several Soviet publications on reading Russian handwritten sources from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. That helped, but the initial weeks still proved to be a painstaking experience of trying to make out handwritten documents. With time, I began to see patterns and could put letters, words, and sentences together. Natasha and other assistants were also generous with their help in my efforts to decipher illegible writing. When, by chance, I encountered printed or typed archival items, I read them with such ease that I often wished I could change my topic.

I found I had to balance archival and library research. Most Soviet archives are open from 10 A.M. to 5:30 P.M., Monday through Friday, while libraries are generally open until 9 or 10 P.M., seven days a week, except for the numerous holidays such as Constitution Day on October 7, the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution on November 7, International Women's Day on March 8, and May Day. All archives and libraries are closed one day of the month for "sanitary day," which allowed for such housekeeping chores as straightening the books on shelves and checking the lights. Several nights a week and one day on the weekend, I tried to do library work. Nineteenth-century Russian journals and periodicals constituted an excellent primary source; and I also took advantage of the wealth of

secondary materials in Soviet libraries without having to wait for the inter-library loan process at my own school, the University of North Florida.

With the Soviet specialists in my area, I also discussed my work. They generally were cooperative, and we exchanged papers and off-prints. Consultations with Soviet scholars not only enhanced my work but added a human dimension to it. After struggling through their articles and books as a graduate student on the banks of the Upper Mississippi, I found it rewarding to meet these scholars on the banks of the Neva and the Moskva. Because we had common research interests, they offered more useful assistance than my adviser by suggesting archival and manuscript collections I should keep in mind for future projects.

My work routines became more productive and efficient when I made time for relaxation and sight-seeing—visits to the countless historical sites, architectural landmarks, and Soviet artistic treasures. Soviet museums such as the Hermitage and the Armoury are eloquent testimonies to the richness and creative genius of Russian culture across the ages. I recall the first meeting with my adviser when, in response to my frustration at not being able to start archival work until authorization came from Moscow, he stressed the importance of visiting the Hermitage as often as possible. I am glad I followed his advice. Its unsurpassed collection of masterpiece paintings, its ornate interiors, and its majestic views of the Neva Embankment are dazzling. Even long walks to capture images of daily life, such as bundled children looking like puffy samovars, became a refreshing change of pace from work.

The three weeks I spent in Odessa highlighted the unpredictable twists and turns of Soviet life. On the three-hour flight departing from Leningrad at 7 A.M., I expected to be served tea or coffee, especially in view of the attractive cuisine depicted in the shiny Aero-flot posters, but nothing at all was served on our flight. On the return flight departing from Odessa at midnight after a four-hour delay, I looked forward to sleeping after the long wait. Seated between two friendly Soviet soldiers carrying guitars, I was the only foreigner on the overbooked flight. Any hope of catching some sleep was disrupted by the commotion of flight attendants rolling well-stocked food carts down the narrow aisle and serving all

passengers a three-course meal that featured a variety of Soviet cheese and sausage. During my stay in Odessa, I slept in a spacious suite in a dormitory near the shores of the Black Sea. After months of communal showers and washrooms, I now had private facilities, but the hot water pipes did not work for the first several days. Such are the vicissitudes of Soviet life.

Near the end of my stay, I forgot the main lesson of life in the Soviet Union and expected things to go as I had planned. For several weeks before my departure from Leningrad, I had been saving rubles to pay the exorbitant fees assessed by Soviet officials on baggage in excess of forty pounds. To my surprise, I was not charged when my baggage

tipped the scales at almost seventy pounds. At customs inspection, I then had to explain why I had so many rubles. It is illegal to take rubles out of the country, and I could not exchange them for dollars because I had received a ruble stipend. At that point, I really did not care what happened to the Monopoly-like Soviet money I had and offered them to the customs inspector. After refusing, she took the rubles to a coffee shop in the waiting room and bought several bottles of highly priced Soviet champagne and French cognac. She then stuffed them in my carry-on bags and ordered that I distribute them as gifts to family and friends. She did her job. I had no more rubles, and I departed not only in but with better spirits than the other scholars.