THE RUSSIAN CHARACTER

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Winston Churchill said in 1939: "I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma". Today, after 44 years, that nation seems to face a turning point in its relations with the West. Its domestic economy is a shambles, its sattellites restless. With these things in mind, I would like to relate some reports of individual human experiences within the Soviet Union - and, before doing that, review a few facts about Russia and its past.

Today, the USSR - Soviet Russia - is the largest political entity in the world. Its area is 8.65 million square miles. That is nearly 3 times the area of our first 48 contiguous states. It is 2 1/3 times the area of China and 2 1/4 times the size of Canada. Its estimated population in 1983 was 271.2 millions - 16% greater than the USA, which was 234.25 million.

China which has an area only 42.6% of Soviet Russia has a population estimated to be nearly 4 times larger, and India with 2 1/2 times the population of Russia, has just one seventh of its area.

Of Russia's early history, it is interesting to note its conquest by the Mongol Tatars in the early 13th. century. What we know as the Russian plains had been settled by Slavs, who had come in as traders and remained to establish some well known cities. They were subjected in those early years, probably the 11th. and 12th. centuries, to frequent forays by the Germanic tribes who took these docile people to be their servants. This human cargo of Slavs led to the term "slave", being applied to any person who was the property of another.

These Slavs became numerous, somewhat prosperous, content and ill prepared to resist the hordes of little yellow men who came

trotting westward on their ponies through a gap that lay between the Ural Mountains and the Caspian Sea. In less than three years, they controlled all of Russia, looting, pillaging and murdering as they came. It was only an epidemic among the Tatar ponies that saved Germany, France and other parts of Western Europe from a like fate. After raising a new crop of horses, these invaders returned to hack, burn, plunder and murder their way back into this Russian or Slavic part of eastern and southern Eruope - and then settle into it to enjoy their spoils.

For the next two centuries, Christian men, women and children were obliged to kneel in the dust whenever they met a descendant of the terrible Genghis Khan - and kiss the stirrup of his horse or suffer the penalty of instant death.

It is told by Van Loon that the rest of Europe was indifferent to the plight of these people to their east - because the Slavs worshipped God according to Greek rites, while they worshipped God according to Roman rites.

This indifference was to cost Europe heavily, since these patient Russian shoulders acquired a disastrous habit of submission during two and half centuries of Tatar domination.

After refusing to pay tribute to, and finally dispelling these Mongols, Russia began to become a strong nation and finally an Empire. But, such men as Ivan the Great - and, later, the Romanov rulers (called Czars) were as autocratic and in many ways as cruel as the conquering Tatars had been. Russians who had rebelled against the autocratic and corrupt rule of Czar Nicholas II found it easy to

accept an equally autocratic and corrupt rule by the heads of their new Soviet Socialist Republic. With this brief introduction, I want to recount some of the things being reported about the USSR and its people today.

Victor Krasin is a former Soviet human-rights activist who came here in 1975 and lives in New York. This story as told recently in the New York Times is adapted from a book by Krasin, published in 1983. For the first time in Soviet history there had developed a human-rights movement, which in 1973 - the time of Krasins' story - had been in existence for eight years. Russian people had finally overcome their fears and spoken openly against violations of legal norms. It was victory over the slavery of almost 50 years.

Repression by the KGB had failed to quell this dissident movement. This seemed to give rise to another KGB ploy - to dishonor it. For that, the security officers had to arrest well known dissidents and have them recant and betray the movement. The two chosen for this drama were Pyotr Yakir, a historian, and Victor Krasin, an economist. Both had spent years in Stalin's labor camps and carried a constant fear of the state security machine. They were charged under Article 70 of the criminal code of the Russian Republic of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic with "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda, carried out with the aim of undermining or weakening the Soviet system".

There was an ostensibly open trial at which the men admitted their guilt and were sentenced to three years in labor camp and three years of internal exile. The case was given full publicity in the

Soviet Union. That was its purpose! In the United States and Western Europe, it was compared to Stalinist trials of the 1930's. Victor Krasin names two important differences. One was that in Stalinist trials, the defendants, even though they "confessed" were shot. These men were spared, then their sentences reduced - and less than 2 years after the trial, permitted to emigrate to the West. The other difference was the method used to secure confessions. In Stalins day, the state security forces used the crudest of methods including physical torture. The present security police, renamed the KGB worked more subtly, with a psychological approach.

The problems of Krasin with security police began in 1949, when with a number of associates at Moscow State University, he was arrested for criticizing Marxism-Leninism as inferior to the concepts of such philosophers as Hegel, Kant, and Schopenhauer. After seven months of interrogation, he was sentenced to eight years hard labor, ending up in a labor camp in central Siberia. After an unsuccessful effort to escape, he was given an added ten years and sent to the most hopeless of labor camps in far northeast Siberia.

The death of Stalin saved him, as his case was reexamined and he was freed in 1954 and allowed to return to Moscow. Over a period of years, events led to his arrest, and imprisonment for the third time on September 12, 1972. He met his KGB investigator, was shown his arrest warrant and asked to begin telling about his anti-Soviet activities. In 1949, when arrested as a youth, he had been confronted with exactly the same questions, but accompanied by vulgar, abusive language. This time, the prisoner laughed, asserted this was not 1949 and that he would not tell anything. "We'll see" said the questioner.

So, everyday from 10 A.M. to 10 P.M. with a one hour break for lunch and another for supper, the interrogation process proceeded relentlessly - always including Saturdays and sometimes Sundays. As Krasin stubbornly refused to relate any dissident activities or tell about his associates, he became the recipient of pointed insinuations of what could happen if he didn't "smarten up". Threats of execution are forbidden but references to a certain legal code were made and prisoners knew this could bring the kind of prison sentence that was frequently followed by death.

When Krasin began to tell a few things after over two months of questioning, he was offered "tea and flattery". Later he suspected that his tea may have been drugged to dull his sense of guilt at what he was doing. So, he agreed to confessions of guilt and public repentance and remorse. He was a "broken" man.

It is remarkable how the Soviet security police collect and retain such masses of detailed information and evidence about its citizens who are suspected or lied about as being in any way a dissident.

The privilege of living in Moscow, or other major cities in Russia, is controlled by a system of internal passports. Such a system, part of old Czarist Russia, was abolished by the Revolution, but reinstated following the famine of 1932. Without it, there would be a flood of the deprived people of rural Russia flowing into the cities. Even so, these country people come to shop, adding to the long lines, seeking food, pots and pans, and heavy clothing.

Meat is a problem. In some more urbanized and westernized

regions, it seems to be plentiful. In remote areas, it may be non-existant. There is a story about the man who goes into a fish store and asks for meat. "This is a fish store", says the saleswoman.

"But, I want meat", the man persisted.

"Across the street", the clerk replied. "That's the place there's no meat".

The vast majority of Russians, even those best educated, know very little of the true facts about the United States. An American guide at a USIA exhibition in Moscow found himself involved in a discussion with two Russian women who wondered if Americans had internal passports as Russians do. When the guide said "no", one woman snorted triumphantly to her friend, "You see? I told you Americans could not travel freely inside their own country".

Children learn hypocracy at a very early age. In school, a story is told to the class. It is called, "Vanya, the War Hero", a Boy who spied against the Germans and helped attack rural villages that served as German bases. Vanya came through as a tough, mean, arrogant youth, in spite of his heroic exploits. The children were then asked to write an essay, "Why Do You Like Vanya" - never "Do You Like Vanya".

One day a child came home from kindergarten to tell her mother "I'm lucky to be born in the Soviet Union". When asked why she replied, "Because children are starving in America". Her mother explained that it was not so, and then warned her four year old not to talk outside the house what was discussed at home.

As they get older, they learn to be submissive to the party line. It is safer to be quiet. "Don't talk too much" is an accepted rule. "Sit in a party meeting thinking about your sweetheart or lover, but with a solemn face, and raise your hand at the right times, and all will be fine." This has to do with integrity. In real life, in the classroom, it does not matter how a child gets the right answers so long as he gets them. And, since teachers are judged partly by how their pupils perform, cheating is tolerated.

Year-end tests are sent to the regional committee. So, teachers walk along the rows and help those who seem puzzled or to be putting down wrong answers, often calling them into a corridor to hand them notes. The same process goes on for "exit exams" for the Universities and Institutes.

David K. Shipler, a former Moscow bureau chief for the New York Times, has related these and other stories in a recent book titled "Russia". He asked officials if he could interview four or five Komsomol members in their teens. He knew only the most loyal would be chosen for such a purpose, but he wanted to see what made them "tick". Some months later while visiting a school for another purpose (also requested), he was, without warning, taken into a classroom where some fifty teenagers fifteen to seventeen sat waiting to be interviewed; they obviously well prepared; he taken by surprise.

Shipler asked how they thought their lives would be different if they lived in the United States. Finally one girl identified as the leader of a "circle" ventured to say that it would depend on whether she was from a well-off American family. If so, she thought

her life would be about the same as in the Soviet Union.

The question and answer period revealed that these boys and girls had very little factual information about social and political problems either outside or inside the Soviet Union. They could not believe there was a serious problem with teenage crime in Russia, or that their Ministry of Internal Affairs told reporters that crime statistics were considered a state secret. Consequently, the students contention that it was a worse problem in America could not be proved.

David Shipler acknowledges the more relaxed attitude toward reporters and other Westerners who may be assigned to the Soviet Union. But, in spite of this detente, he reported the power of the KGB to disrupt contact with Russians is formidable. And, all Americans who try to study the country and its affairs have to develope a keen sense of wariness, of prudence akin to paranoia. They must learn to smell the difference between an innocent encounter and a KGB laid trap.

A correspondent for the Los Angeles Times accepted a paper on extrasensory perception from a Soviet "Scientist" he had come to know - and was arrested, being accused of receiving state secrets. An American bureau chief was told by the Foreign Ministry's Press Department that one of his correspondents was spying for Israel. The department director tapped a thick file as he made the accusation but refused to show it to the bureau chief - who walked out exclaiming, "Well, I guess you have no case then".

The threat of such things happening is enervating. People there on extended stays for business, scholarships, government, or media assignments are covered with official lies, and smiles, with friendliness that can change to chilling hostility at any moment of the state's choosing.

There are many small acts of courtesy you would like to extend to friends, any one of which may be contrary to some Soviet code and become a cause for arrest and questioning. David Shipler says that not until he left Moscow for good and tension had drained out of him, did he fully accept how exhausting this had been.

Bribes are a common way of life in Russia. Teachers and school officials accepted "gifts", which resulted in better grades, and at graduation, lists of job openings - not otherwise available. The situation in housing and medicine was even worse. Money could always be used, sometimes the equal of 8 months salary for access to a small apartment, to which you should have had open rights. To have scarce tickets of admission to an American Rock Concert or some similar Western attraction could be more useful than money.

Almost every Soviet citizen finds he has violated one or more laws or regulations, thus making it possible for arrest to occur at any moment. They know this but can't avoid it.

Party membership extends to only 6 per cent of the total population. Membership alone does not seem to guarantee a job or some special privilege. But, a non-member is usually barred. And, the party makes or approves assignments to almost all important posts, such as school principals or factory managers. It is the

full time, paid party worker who has almost exclusive access to the closed shops where imported clothing, food, and electronic equipment are sold. He (or she) also has a top spot on the list of those waiting to buy a car - or to move to a better apartment, or a chance to work or travel abroad.

One thing the citizens of the classless society understand is class. A driver of an "official car" expected any vehicle of lesser status to defer to him in traffic situations. And, a building superintendent dressed neatly and obviously never soiling his hands, would never make the slightest concession to accomodate a mere "maid" in the building. Yet, in taxis, it was a very strict custom for a passenger to ride beside the driver.

There are many written rules which if obeyed justly would eliminate the favoritism and special privileges - the infringements of human rights. One dissident - after a few years of speaking out mildly for himself and others - began to write letters to higher authorities. This got him immediate attention. Since no sane Soviet would think of making such a protest, he must be insane, and obviously in need of treatment. He got it, over four years, with painful drugs and endless sessions with "pseudo psychiatrists".

Soviet society is arranged in enclaves and stratified layers. There are circles - and layers of privilege and deprivations. An athlete can have a ticket to a special game, a dancer may get a seat at the Bolshoi, but not vice-versa. The writer can get a scarce copy of Dostoyevsky, but a doctor cannot. A doctor can some times get scarce drugs - a vegetable store clerk may get the scarce

fresh tomatoes, a stationery store clerk the much needed typewriter ribbon. Others get such favors only through pull, or by going to the widespread "black markets". In their struggle for advancement and comfort, the Soviets found themselves constantly bending - breaking - or ignoring the mass of impossible laws.

There were difficult decisions. It was illegal - but was it immoral for private persons to bring in essential drugs to care for cardiac patients, in certain hospitals. It is illegal but is it immoral for a pediatrician facing a certain infectious situation without necessary antibiotics to advise mothers to go to the black market to get penicillin or streptomycin?

It has seemed certain through Russia's long history that its people of all classes have a strong love for their country, for its land and history. Russia's anarchists, nihilists and revolutionaries have been its educated men and women. One such woman was Nadia Mandelstam, wife of poet Osip Mandelstam and author of two books of memoirs of her poet husband and her life in Russia. The books are: "Hope Against Hope", published in 1970, and "Hope Abandoned" in 1974. Three years later she granted two very dear friends, American writers, the rare privilege of an interview, to be published only after her death.

In the interview, she was asked if the suffering of Russia had served some larger purpose. Did she believe in the rebirth of the spiritual values she had been writing about? Her answer was, "No. Here, nothing can be reborn. Here, everything is simply dead. Here, there are only queues". It is very easy, she continued, "to govern a hungry country. Over the past 60 years, the economy has been ruined. The villages are empty. Only old women and drunken men remain."

"This is a ravaged country", she said. "There is no hope left and no intelligentsia left, and no peasantry". "But, what about the young people", she was asked, "Don't you think their courage will enable them to bring about better things". Her shocking reply was, "I think if youth comes to the fore, it will be Stalinist, and that just as before, the young will believe in terror and in Lenin".

In "Hope Abandoned", Nadia wrote that her book, nearly finished, might not see the light of day, but after reading it, be destroyed by those whose task it is to destroy books, to eradicate words, to stamp out thought - "functionaries to whom nothing matters; neither life, nor man, nor the earth, nor anything that lights our way".

"Heaven help them", she wrote, "Will they really succeed in their task of universal destruction".

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