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Brezhnev's Winter

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AVON HILLS SALON

Thoughts from the Avon Hills

Nick Hayes on: Brezhnev's Winter

JANUARY 16, 2019 / LMOE

This year my preoccupation with finishing a book, "Looking for Leningrad," has consumed my energy and time for writing. Thus, I have held back from posting on my usual topics and themes. To take your mind off the "banality" of politics in the Trump era I am sending out this short excerpt from my "Looking for Leningrad." Take it as a seasonal story set in Moscow's coldest winter on record. I apologize in advance that the excerpt contain some Soviet jargon that would not be familiar to you. MGU, for example, refers to Moscow State University. Ostankino refers

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to the State Committee on Radio and Television.
Both figure prominently in "Looking for Leningrad" from its first to last chapter

Here are a few reminiscences on Moscow in the winter 1978-1979 . . .



Statue of Brezhnev; photo by author

Winter came early that year. A cold front arrived in Moscow in mid-October about the same time historians remember it had arrived in 1812 to welcome Napoleon to Moscow. The unexpectedly cold temperatures prompted me to lower the ear flaps on my Russian fur cap, a *shlapa*. A nosey babushka on the street focused a disapproving eye on me. "Young man," she chided, "it's too early for that. If you pull down your ear flaps now, what will you do in December and January." By mid-December, I conceded she had a point. I had committed my defense against winter too early.

Temperatures plummeted that December. The weather reporting on Ostankino television became increasingly vague and incomplete. The tongue-tied weather reporting on state television untethered tongues on the street. Rumors spoke of an unprecedented cold wave sweeping westward from Siberia to Moscow cold enough to make even Siberians shiver. New Year's Day confirmed the rumors. The temperature reached minus-40, a record low for the city of Moscow and the point where Celsius and Fahrenheit temperatures converge.

My immediate impulse was to embrace the coming of a legendary Russian winter's cold wave. I would play a latter day Zhivago at Varykino in his Siberian drama. Besides, I had already taken cover. The AP correspondent, Bart Reppert had graciously invited my family to apartment sit at his place. He and his wife were leaving Moscow for a holiday vacation at cross country ski resort in Finland. The setting was perfect. Reppert lived in one of the "German" or "foreigner's suburbs" in Moscow where the Kremlin quarantined western diplomats, businessmen, and journalists. His apartment was in a complex on Kutuzovsky Prospekt, the *indekc svyazi* or zip code of Moscow's elite.

Indoor playtime had exhausted its ability to entertain my sons. The Soviet toys made of a hard and easily breakable plastic had never captured their fancy. The hand-carved wooden folk toys appealed only to their father's fantasies about re-creating the things of traditional Russia. The wooden bear on a small handheld paddle had moving arms that a child could flap up and down but never received the call to play and joined a few matryoshka dolls on a shelf where they formed a sad colony of unwanted Christmas toys. My sons, a toddler and a three-year-old, did not suffer boredom lightly. I could not convert them into accepting my idea of a perfect Russian day reading Chekhov or jotting fragments of wisdom in a notebook. In years to come, I imagined there would be Ph.D. students who would rescue my notebook from the archives and weave its fragments into dissertations or monographs.

Stalin had left Moscow with a unique heating system. From a central heating plant, the system pumped hot water through a vast subterranean matrix of generators, boilers, massive pipes and relay stations that pumped steam heat into the city's buildings. Inefficiency plagued the system. Occasionally, the pipelines showed themselves. Like a whale coming up for air, the pipelines would rise from the ground for a short stretch and then dive back to their underground world. Even in the coldest winter months you could easily track the routes of the pipelines. Heat lost from the cause of heating Moscow warmed the ground above the pipeline and enabled grass to grow. A meter or two wide, linear green zones marked the trail of the heating pipes throughout the city.

Stalin's system dated from the 1930s and had avoided any major breakdowns until this winter. As temperatures descended and stayed at record lows pipes burst and left large sections of Moscow without heat. A chaotic internal migration within the city ensued as Muscovites fled frozen apartment complexes in search of a friend's warm couch in an as yet unaffected district of the city. Our temporary quarters on Kutuzovskii Prospekt held out. However, Reppert's return from Finland forced us to take shelter elsewhere. MGU and its environs had succumbed to the collapse of the heating system throughout its section of the city. Finally, the U.S. Embassy's resident Lutheran minister showed some pity and invited us to stay at his apartment in another of Moscow's "foreigner's suburbs."

The celebration for that New Year's Eve might have led you to believe that the new year, 1979 would be the year of Brezhnev. Anticipation was building. In the fall, Brezhnev published a three-volume set of memoirs. Known as the Brezhnev Trilogy, the memoirs consisted of three volumes – *The Little Land*, *Resurrection*, and *The Virgin Lands*. The three books chronicle the life of Brezhnev from a humble childhood in Ukraine, to his alleged military leadership in "The Great Patriotic War," and the Soviet development agriculture in Central Asia.

Of all the attempts at creating leader cults in Russian history, the promotion of Brezhnev stands out as the most ludicrous and cruel. By 1978, Russians knew that the Soviet leader showed signs of senility. His slurred speech struggled to deliver the simplest public pronouncements. On his best days, he still looked like an old guy with a hangover.

None of this dissuaded the Kremlin. The press proclaimed Brezhnev a literary genius. Within a week of the publication of his memoirs, he received the Soviet Union's highest award for literature, the Lenin Prize. On New Year's Eve, the media could not contain itself. Soviet

Television devoted the entirety of its popular music and variety show, *The Little Blue Light*, to a homage to Leonid Ilych. Celebrities from popular culture gushed with praise for the leader. Representing Moscow's American comrades, the American singer, Dean Reed, the "Red Elvis," appeared in a TV message from East Berlin. Brezhnev's favorite actor, Vyacheslav Tikhonov put in a cameo appearance and made a special announcement. There would be an adaptation of the trilogy for the stage, Tikhonov announced, and he would play the lead. The hosts interviewed literary critics and professors who elucidated the finer points of Brezhnev's masterpiece. The program built up to its highlight moments before midnight. Brezhnev appeared in a televised message giving his best wishes to the Soviet people for the year ahead.

Soviet TV did not have to worry about anything like the Nielson's Ratings. Just in case, Ostankino tried a trick to guarantee something of an audience. Soviet TV preceded the broadcast of the Brezhnev special with the broadcast of what truly is a Soviet era masterpiece – the film by Eldar Ryazonov, *The Irony of Fate* (1976). Its popularity survived the Soviet Union and remains a classic of Russian cinema.

As it turned out, 1979 was not the year of Brezhnev. Soviet troops had launched their invasion of Afghanistan at the end of December 1978. Rumors and leaks from within the Kremlin inner circle describe an inebriated Brezhnev at the time of the decision to invade Afghanistan.

An overstock of unsold copies of the *Brezhnev Trilogy* remained unsold and untouched in Moscow's shops for another decade. In 1988, the Soviet authorities rounded up all the remaining copies and turned the winner of the Lenin Prize – *The Little Land*, *Resurrection*, and *The Virgin Lands* – into waste pulp. An irony of fate, the Russians would say.
