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Looking for Leningrad my Russian Life

Nicholas Hayes

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, nhayes@csbsju.edu

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AVON HILLS SALON

Thoughts from the Avon Hills



Looking for Leningrad My Russian Life

OCTOBER 3, 2018



For the past eight years, the task of turning a lifetime of memories, boxes of notebooks, and recollected conversations into a memoir of my life and times in the onetime Soviet Union and Russia has preoccupied my thoughts and writing. This fall this labor of the mind and heart will finally see publication under the title “Looking for Leningrad My Russian Life (Nodin Press).

Here’s a sample. The unseemly relationship of Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump has aroused considerable interest in the operations of the Russian intelligence services. Americans have added a Russian word to their vocabulary, “kompromat’. You might enjoy this story of my first encounter with “kompromat’.” The excerpt comes from chapter three of “Looking for Leningrad.” The story takes place in Moscow in the fall 1978...

“Spooks”

Architecture plays politics. On the campus grounds of Moscow State University, the architecture was still fighting the 1950s and 1960s battles between Stalinism and reform. Stalin's proxy in this war was the jewel in the crown of his seven "wedding cake" sky-scrapers, Moscow State University.



Moscow State University in its Glory Days

It towered over the grounds dwarfing and intimidating the new buildings that had rolled out in the 1960s and 1970s.

The "Humanitarian Faculty Building No. 1," or, as it was known by its acronym, "GUMFAK," embodied in glass and concrete the glum modernism of the Soviet 1960s in architecture.



Humanitarian Faculty Building No. 1 or GUMFAK

It rose sluggishly in a rectangular twelve stories with an extension on its mezzanine, a horizontal counter-point to the singularly vertical design of the main building. The critics and savants of Soviet architecture ignored GUMFAK until quite recently when two scholars of Soviet modernism saw in the building “the spirit of the period during which the first human spaceflight and the 1980 Olympics took place.” They saw GUMFAK as “a modern building whose appearance and atmosphere were deigned to fight cultural and pedagogical inertia.” Stalinist architecture delighted in a certain socialist baroque and overly indulged in ornamentation. GUMFAK made a virtue out of its barren interior or so its scholars claimed: “Bare interiors allowed students to appreciate the thoughts of their generation’s intellectual idols more clearly, while recreation areas facilitated productive discussions with teachers.” During my year there, an under-stocked “buffet” with an espresso machine that never worked passed for GUMFAK’s recreational space. I never saw a student in a discussion there with anyone.

My program for the year began with an intensive course in Russian in GUMFAK. The lessons

succeeded in moving my Russian from the unintelligible to the merely ungrammatical. There I also picked up my monthly stipend. The first time a generous apparatchik over-paid me. I had a day or two to enjoy the self-esteem of a stipend of twice that distributed to my American colleagues. However, a very nervous Russian clerk accosted me after my Russian class and somewhat frantically explained the error. He seemed both relieved and surprised when I pulled out my wallet and handed him the rubles. Of course, the resolution of the problem would not be that easy. I spent another hour or two filling out forms.

My first professional contact came in a telephone call to my dormitory blok. My advisor and host, Dr. Sergei Kokushkin, requested that I meet with him the following day at his office in GUMFAK. I arrived early. The waiting room featured a cheerless hospitality. A few unwelcoming chairs, like gloomy waiters in a Soviet restaurant, hinted that I should look elsewhere if I wanted to be comfortable. A blonde, attractive receptionist had not raised her head and eyes from her desk when I entered the office. She reluctantly acknowledged my presence and tersely asked, "Chto Vy?" or "What's with you?" "Dr. Kokushkin is expecting you," she said in reply to my awkward introduction. Gesturing toward a chair, she continued, "Please sit down. Sergei Sergeivich will see you in a minute." She had exhausted her interest in me. The promised minute turned into five, ten and more. I had not even rated the customary offer of tea.

The entrance door opened. A young man, about my age, entered, politely greeted the receptionist by her name and patronymic and turned toward me. "Are you American?" he asked. He spoke a seamless American English. My reply, "Da, ya Amerikanits" brought out a touch of excitement to him. "Ah, that is good," he said, "Perhaps, you could help me." He continued, "I am writing a dissertation on the Puritans in American history." My reply was disingenuous. "Unfortunately, you have met the wrong type of American," I injected. "I am a Catholic and know very little about the Puritans." "Catholic!" he said. His eyes widened. "I, too, am Catholic." His name was Andrei. He joked that my name, Nick would make me popular in Russia.

Russian Catholics are a rarity. I showed off a bit of my knowledge of nationalities in the Soviet Union. I asked if he was Polish, Lithuanian or one of those Uniate Ukrainians for whom we prayed in my parochial school during Captive Nations Week. No, he was very much a Russian. There was a small community of Russian Catholics in Moscow. Perhaps I would like to meet them?

I took the bait like a crappie on the Minnesota fishing opener. My imagination was already showing images of my Moscow bylines on the front page of the New York Times. We agreed to meet again. Only a week or two into my year in Russia, I made what would be the first of a long

line of meetings with Russians at an agreed upon time on the platform of a metro station. Metro Universitet.

He added one last request. He complained about the difficulty of obtaining any books in Russia on the Puritans. Would it be possible, he wondered, that I could obtain for him some of the writings of Cotton Mather? It didn't cross my mind to wonder why my new Russian friend would be interested in the man behind the Salem Witch Trials. A bit too eager to play my new role as the American voice of the Soviet underground, I assured him that I would be able to easily pick up a book or two of Mather's writing. I dismissed a pesky warning in my head that reminded me of my orientation meeting with the U.S. Consulate staff. Soviet law strictly forbade the distribution of foreign religious materials.

The receptionist interrupted this fraternization between Catholics: "Dr. Kokushkin will meet you now." She opened the door and ceremoniously waved her hand in the direction of a well-dressed and rather handsome Kokushkin. He rose from his chair at the apex of an apparatchik's typical "T" shaped table. The motion of his hand said that I should pick my place at the table. A new protocol faced me. Do I sit directly across from my distinguished host or somewhere more appropriate to my status at the lower end of the "T?" I split the difference and sat at a chair a place or two removed from Kokushkin. His welcome included a few references to my family, my work and home in Texas and so liberated me from the always awkward task of explaining myself to a stranger. Kokushkin then pointed toward a colleague who was joining us for our meeting. The colleague politely said hello. This would be his only contribution to the conversation. It was my first encounter with this Soviet custom. Any professional appointment or conversation usually included an extraneous colleague who offered a perfunctory greeting and thereafter tended to smile inanely and volunteered nothing to the conversation.

I side-stepped through a few sentences on my research project. The blank expression on Kokushkin's face remained unmoved as I dropped the banned names of the philosophers of "national bolshevism" from the 1920s and nervously said the name, "Stalin" once. Sergei Sergeivich may have been honestly ignorant of my topic or wanted to conceal his discomfort. Our silent colleague at the meeting jotted down something in a pocket notebook.

Our meeting was brief, courteous and unproductive. I had better things to do. I pulled my diary out of my pocket. Years later, when I learned that Kokushkin specialized in the history of the Constitution of the USSR, I wondered why would anyone actually study that?

A few days later, Andrei was waiting for me on the metro station platform at the appointed time. The station lacked the heroic murals of the older metro stations that decorated the walls with scenes from the glorious history of the USSR. The walls of Kiev station, for example glistened with mosaics offering images of the bonds of friendship between the Russians and Ukrainians. By contrast, Metro Universitet offered a refreshing lack of hyperbole and embellishment. The pink granite walls kept their silence and left you alone as you bustled through the station.

In Moscow, you do not start up a conversation just anywhere. At Andrei's suggestion, we left the metro station for one of Moscow's "ice cream cafes." This one stood on nearby Lomonosovskii Prospekt. The eighteenth century scientist, Lomonosov was the namesake of Moscow State University. His name on the street offered the only evidence that this was a university neighborhood. If you were looking for a bookstore, forget this neighborhood and go to "Dom Knigi" (The House of Books) in the center of Moscow. On a good day, the cafe offered ice cream, cookies, tea, and brandy. Andrei and I had happened upon on a not-so-good day. This was a tea only conversation. Andrei had a "vocation." He was determined to become a Catholic priest. He dreamed of enrolling in the newly re-opened Catholic seminary in Lithuania. After ordination, he would return to Moscow and minister to Russian Catholics. He belonged to a "secret circle" of Catholics who met on Sunday evenings at the Catholic Cathedral.

The next Sunday evening, I followed his directions to the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception of the Holy Virgin Mary. Erected in 1911, the neo-Gothic Cathedral occupied a piece of prime real estate in Moscow on the Garden Ring Road. The neo-gothic Cathedral was collapsing due to a near century of neglect, vandalism, and structural collapse. This island of Catholicism in Orthodox Russia had enjoyed only a few years of peace until the 1917 Revolution unleashed two decades of harassment and persecution. Stalin's regime closed the church in 1938, stripped it of its sacred art, and converted into a warehouse and offices. The church's altar and organ had not too mysteriously disappeared in 1938. During the war, Soviet authorities viewed the Cathedral as a collaborator with the Germans. They demolished two of the church's four towers on the grounds that the spires served as markers directing the Luftwaffe to targets in Moscow's center. The main tower collapsed in the 1950s. A fire scorched the walls and brought down a few of its buttresses. The official re-opening and re-consecration of the church would have to wait until Gorbachev's time. In the 1970s, an unofficial re-opening had proceeded in discretely defiant increments. By the time Andrei drew me to the scene in 1978, survivors and descendants of the parish had reclaimed a corner of the church with a few pews, a make-shift altar and a crucifix rescued from the rubble. The metaphor of the resurrection of the crucifix was not lost on the congregation.

The Cathedral had never made it into the age of electricity. Soviet era campaigns for “electrification” had passed it by. A few candles now provided a bit of light. Andrei’s group comprised a handful of elderly women, a few dislocated Poles and Lithuanians, some lost exiles from France and a small flock of unbaptized crows perched on a pile of rubble. The priest, a Lithuanian did not risk a confrontation with the Soviet authorities by saying a Mass. He began with an obvious and somewhat theatrical Sign of the Cross using two fingers in the Catholic style. The priest kept his homily to a whisper mentioning the woeful state of the Cathedral, a few references to the New Testament, and an abbreviated selection of prayers from the Ordinary of the Mass. Playing on a metaphor from John 10:1-21, the priest described the Catholic Church as the Good Shepherd that had come back to Russia in search of its lost sheep. The Church risked great peril as it sought its lost sheep not only in Russia but in the Ukraine, Poland, and Lithuania. The priest called on his Faithful to pray for Russian vocations to the priesthood and for the restoration of the Cathedral. He then led this humble gathering of the Faithful in reciting the Nicene Creed with stress added to its profession of belief in “One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.” The priest gave the congregation his blessing and sent us off to go in peace.

The parishioners approached the altar, crossed themselves before the crucifix and hastily disappeared into the darkness beyond the candles’ light. Andrei, however, approached the priest, pointed to me and led the priest over to meet me. He spoke English. He had relatives in Chicago. We exchanged pleasantries. I accepted his invitation to come again next Sunday evening.

I remembered that I had heard something about the Cathedral before. In the late 1970s, the Cathedral gained some recognition by association. The poet, actor and singer, Vladimir Vysotsky lived across the street from the Cathedral and had lent his name to the cause of its restoration. His sympathy for the humbled Catholic Cathedral was his wife’s cause, the French actress, Marina Vlady. Vysotsky was not the type of guy to venerate the purity of the Blessed Virgin. Besides, the Russian Orthodox Church did not subscribe to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. A healthy skepticism and irreverence for the doctrine of the “Immaculate Conception” in one of his poems circulated in samizdat and magnitizat at the time. Under the title “A Poem about the Carpenter Joseph, the Virgin Mary, the Holy Spirit, and the Immaculate Conception,” Vysotsky wrote . . .

I came home from work,

Put my awl on the wall,

Suddenly someone flits out the window

From my wife, from the bed!

I, of course, ask, "Who is it?"

And she answered, "It is the Holy Spirit!"

...

He will be born, but I know

That he ain't no Jesus Christ."

Vysotsky's cynicism is infectious. As I left the cathedral, Muscovites sped in their Ladas along the Garden Ring Road, busily pursuing the promised wonder of a Soviet future and disinterested in the old story on the side of the road of a violated and abused cathedral. I looked back. Now empty, the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception receded into the shadows of the Moscow night like an apparition from a distinctively Soviet form of hell. The Soviet gulag took on many forms and shapes. The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception was a prisoner in the one reserved for suspect churches, monasteries, and sacred architecture. My new friend, Andrei, was far, far closer to the Kremlin, than to Rome.

Nick Hayes

[← Tony Cunningham on "All Will & No Reason"](#)

[Black Friday to Cyber Monday: On Climate](#)

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