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From Minneapolis to Russia: What a historian's Cold War journey tells us about today

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MINNPOST

From Minneapolis to Russia: What a historian's Cold War journey tells us about today

By Nick Hayes | 07/20/09



REUTERS/Ferenc Redei

Minister Gyula Horn (right) and his Austrian counterpart, Alois Mock, cut the "Iron Curtain" on the Hungarian-Austrian border in 1989.

The editors at MinnPost suggested that I begin these postings by telling you a bit about what has shaped my view of the world. For starters, blame it on my childhood in the high noon of the Cold War.

In the Catholic grade school of my boyhood, the Cold War was personal. I still remember how the news of the brutal Soviet intervention in Hungary in 1956 was brought to our classrooms and parish church through vivid presentations that rendered the cruel event as an unfolding mystery play about the nature of evil in our time. There was a black and white photograph in our textbook that showed the boot of a Red Army soldier crushing under its heel the consecrated wafers of the Eucharist in sanctuary of a Catholic church in Hungary.

Throughout the remainder of the year, visiting priests, nuns and refugees from Hungary appeared in our classrooms or sometimes in the pulpit at Mass to tell us about the horrors perpetrated by the Russians, ask for our prayers, and pass around the collection plate



We also had reason to fear that our fate could be worse than Hungary's. We had regular air raid drills, or as we called them, "atom bomb drills." When the alarm sounded, the nuns herded us into the gym where we were told to crouch on the floor, place our face between our knees, and never, never look out the window. Our eyes, we were told, would melt in the event of an atom bomb attack.

To this day, in my mind, one of the great unsolved mysteries of the Cold War is why the Russians had targeted Christ the King Grade School at 5200 York Ave. S. in Minneapolis for a nuclear attack.

Despite the nuns' warnings, I peeked at the windows hoping to catch a glimpse of Russians in airplanes flying over the parish. Call it sympathy for the devil. The a-bomb drills were the beginning of my curiosity not just about the Russians but about other worlds.

Years later, a Russian, the novelist Leo Tolstoy drew me into his school of history. In the summer after my first year in college, I took up an English professor's challenge to read Tolstoy's "War and Peace." OK, I admit that I may have skimmed over at least a few of the novel's nearly 1,500 pages. Nevertheless, that summer I converted to Tolstoy's philosophy of history.

Let me explain by re-telling a few anecdotes from the past and present.

Summertime comedy

The summer of 1989 wallowed in the doldrums brought on in May by the Tiananmen Massacre. Beijing appeared to have got its message across. Brutal force can work. We wrote off as a bit of summertime comedy the first act of what would be one of the 20th Century's most epic dramas. On May 2, Hungary had **started to dismantle** the 150 miles of barbed wire that formed the "iron curtain" along its Austrian border. The idea was to showcase that Hungary was both a loyal team player in Moscow's Warsaw Pact alliance and a friend of Europe.

The media picked up an amusing side-bar to the story. As they did every summer, East German tourists loaded their families into the boxy little midget of a car known as the Trabant and headed off to Hungary for their vacations. This year, they didn't stop there. In June and July, there were reports that a few brave Trabants took advantage of the relaxed border check points and crossed into Austria.

On Aug. 19, the Hungarian and Austrian governments planned a temporary event to showcase the new spirit of Austrian-Hungarian friendship. At the Austrian border town of Sopron, for three hours,

the border would be completely open to enable Hungarians to participate in a "friendship picnic." Neither Budapest nor Vienna was pleased when over 900 uninvited East Germans crashed the party in Sopron.

The press reports patronized the story casting the East Germans and their Trabants as a tribe of Lilliputians in the land of the black Mercedes-Benz. No one got the story right. It was the plucky little Trabants, not the tanks of NATO, that set in motion a series of events that culminated in the opening of the Berlin Wall on November 11, 1989.

So much a product of the early years of the Cold War, I was slow to realize the coming of its end. I wish I could tell you now that then I realized that history was being made in those little Trabants and not in the halls of power in Moscow, Washington, or the capitols of Europe.

I spent much of the summer of 1989 in the old Soviet Union trying to make sense of the country's recent elections and the growing unrest in the Baltic states — Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Like most Western observers, I was infatuated with the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev. I gave him a pass when the only significant result of his electoral reforms and a new legislative assembly was to elect him as its president. He belittled the minority opposition in the assembly led by the Nobel Prize winner and human rights activist Andrei Sakharov and by Gorbachev's nemesis, Boris Yeltsin. He should have embraced them as his allies and instead courted support from old guard Communists who were already plotting a coup to send him into retirement.

Visiting the Baltic countries, I witnessed the emerging power of the "popular front" opposition parties that brought out hundreds of thousands of protesters to the streets of Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius and culminated on Aug. 23 in the formation of a human chain in which more than 2 million people joined hands forming an unbroken line across Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. I was sending newspaper reports back home, telephoning in commentaries for Minnesota Public Radio and videotaping the scene for TPT's "Almanac."

Coming change

In my reports, I was close but did not quite get the story right. Change was coming, I argued, but coming only on Gorbachev's terms.

Meanwhile, someone else watched the summer of 1989. He had with a different take on the events. A 37-year-old KGB agent, Vladimir Putin was stationed in the East German city of Dresden and plotting to undo the changes started by the Trabant drivers, Gorbachev and reformers back in the U.S.S.R.

Today, Putin is more pleased with the turn of world events than he was in 1989. Twenty years later, we are in the middle of another grim summer of low expectations.

In June, the government in Teheran set the tone smashing its opposition with an Iranian brand of Tiananmen tactics. Last week, Natasha Estemirova, a human rights activist, **was murdered in Chechnya**. The murder is another in a series of messages from the thug, Ramzan Kadyrov, who rules Chechnya and his well-placed friends in the Kremlin about what happens to pesky activists and journalists in the Russian part of the world.

Soon, Vladimir Putin will visit South Ossetia, the break-away region of Georgia, where he will flaunt the Russian military victory over Georgia one year ago. He wants to make sure that all his neighbors in the former Soviet Union get his message. Putin's Russia is a new Goliath eager to bully and able to crush any new Davids in the neighborhood.



kremlin.ru
Vladimir Putin as a young KGB agent.

In such times, turn to Tolstoy's "War and Peace." You have to flip past a thousand plus pages to a passage near the end. The novel's hero — Pierre Bezukov — reflects on his life that witnessed the unprecedented destruction of the Napoleonic wars and acquiesced to annihilation of his dreams for a better world.

Pierre has one last dream. "Any great truth," he says, "is simple. I have a simple truth. If so many evil men can come together to do so much evil, cannot as many good men come together to do at least as much good."

If he were writing now, Tolstoy would add "and women" to the phrase "as many men" and find them among the unrecognized heroes: the Trabant drivers of today from the streets of Teheran to the villages of the Caucasus who have the courage to do at least as much good as the evil done by those in power.

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