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Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue, New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

I spent the last of my twenty-three days in the Soviet Union in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev (population: 1.4 million), looking for a jar with a closeable top. I was not insistent on a glass jar, but was quite willing to accept any other sort of container -- metal, plastic, even wood -- so long as it could be securely shut.

The search originated from the following prosaic circumstances: Having a number of unused Intourist food coupons, and unable to reconvert them into cash, I decided to bring back to Belgrade a helping of Russian caviar. But, since I would not actually be getting home for another four days, I needed a container that would preserve the caviar (and the contents of my suitcase) against the jolts of air travel, customs inspections, hotel porters, etc.

In Moscow and Leningrad, I had seen caviar on sale in the small, pound or half-pound hermetically sealed jars familiar to us from Western delicatessens, "appetizer" stores and charcuteries. I soon learned, however, that Kiev had not seen caviar in this size for several years. It was regularly delivered (from Moscow) only in cans of two kilograms -- not only too expensive for me, but beyond the legal export limit. This came as no great surprise: I had already discovered that many items (ranging from traditional Russian grandmother dolls to copies of the Yugoslav newspaper Politika) which were on sale in Moscow and Leningrad tourist hotels were not to be had once one moved south into the provinces.



NEVSKY PROSPECT, LENINGRAD

So that it was necessary to improvise -- to make do with an old jam jar, or something of the sort. This, indeed, was immediately offered to me, and I was about to accept it when a neurotic suspicion (born of prior experience in "socialist" shopping) prompted me to ask: "How are you going to close it?" No problem at all, said my university-educated Intourist guide: we'll wrap it with paper and tie it with string. Knowing the quality of Soviet string and the scarcity of Soviet wrapping paper, as well as the unruly state of the things

in my suitcase, I was compelled to decline this "natural" solution as too risky. Instead, I asked foolishly what had happened to the jar's original top. Foolishly, because all the jars I had already seen in Russia were fitted with metal tops which, once pried open, could no longer be closed again; and why should anyone use this kind if the screw-on variety were available? However, I was invited to look around Kiev and see if I could turn up some other sort of closeable container.

I set off with visions of the strong, thick-glass, metal-bound jars with which my mother (a pre-Revolutionary Kiev schoolgirl) and all her Russian-American friends used to store their strawberry varenye and other home-made preserves back in the days before World War II. This, I soon learned, was absolutely utopian -- and I still wonder how, or whether, Russian housewives store their jams these days. I spent the morning touring the shops by myself, and in the afternoon mustered my Intourist girl to look again, perhaps in shops I had missed. We went to the five-storey Univermag department store, to the new synthetics shop, to the tableware shop, to the store for (luxury) glassware, to the new gift shop, even in desperation to toy stores. My guide insisted the situation was unusual: just two and a half weeks ago, she had bought a plastic butter-container ("a green one") which would be just what I needed. However, after several depressing arguments with surly saleswomen who refused to admit any knowledge of what could be had beyond their own allotted area, the girl gave in to my pleas to return to Univermag and take that plastic candy dish (Russian price: \$1.30, estimated Woolworth's price: 55 cents) we had seen earlier in the day. To be sure, it did not have a screw-on, or even clamp-on top; but the bottom and top lips did seem to fit, and we could surely fasten them together with tape. I confess I had originally been thinking of cellulose tape, but after a few minutes conversation realized that my girl had never heard of, let alone seen such a thing. So, after claiming the candy dish at Univermag, it became a relatively easy matter to shop the pharmacies for some adhesive plaster; in the third such pharmacy, we found it, and thus -- no more than nine hours after I had raised the problem of how to get the caviar out of Russia -- the problem was efficiently solved.

Long before this incident, I had come to the conclusion that the so-called Soviet "economic challenge" is a wry joke, indulged by both sides in the cold war out of varying political necessities. (The necessity in Washington is to promote, by one means or another, various economic and social reforms which the majority of the American people are too lazy, comfortable or conservative to support unless frightened by the Communist "challenge"; the necessity in Moscow, of course, is to justify a regime which has no other apparent justification.) Under its present management, the Soviet Union will do well to catch up with Slovenia or Slovakia by 1980. As for catching up with the United States or Western Europe, I am inclined to agree with the conclusions of Vermont Royster, editor of the Wall Street Journal: "Never in your lifetime or mine."

One is prepared, in coming to Russia, for the drabness of the clothing worn by the great majority of people, but it remains a shock: not only for the lack of color and style, but because so much

of it has obviously been worn too often (Soviet dry-cleaners provide poor service for luxury prices) and out of season. On the Nevsky Prospect in Leningrad, I found people staring at my plain, old rubber overshoes -- to discover that in this foggiest, rainiest of cities people either continued to wear their summer shoes, slippers or step-ins when it rained, or else donned heavy winter snow-boots. (In rural areas, peasant dress did not seem to differ markedly from that of a century ago, including in some cases burlap wrappings in place of shoes.)

Nor is one quite prepared to find, in the land of sputniks and computer technology, the ever-present abacus as the sole means of mass computation and book-keeping. I believe I saw no more than a dozen cash registers or adding machines in visits to department stores, restaurants, hotels in seven Soviet cities, including the three largest and best supplied. The girls are quick enough on the abacus in reckoning your purchases, but the inventory at the end of the day must be a nightmare.

What is almost embarrassing about visiting Russia is that these signs of economic backwardness turn up not only when one wanders off the beaten track by oneself, but even when one is escorted by proud official guides to presumed showplaces.

At the Moscow State University, for example, one is shown a gymnasium and swimming pool that would have seemed quite ordinary in my junior high school days (Brooklyn, 1940) and clearly expected to respond with a compliment; one does not have the heart to ask why the university gym and pool are being used at the moment by grade-school children. Or one is ushered with pride onto the hydrofoil boat which plies the Don between Rostov and Azov; it would be unfeeling to ask why half the passengers on this truly modern vessel are old peasant women dragging sacks of potatoes or vegetables to take

advantage of a price differential thirty kilometers down-river. When one is taken to a brand-new self-service cafeteria in Leningrad where one can get breakfast early and speedily, what is the point of complaining about the napkins-- made of coarse paper-toweling and smaller than a dollar bill? Yet one is forced to register a protest when one is taken to one of the newest districts of Moscow and shown the "new architecture" of what is probably the most modern market in Russia: The architecture (poured concrete square with glass center dome) is of the sort common to armories or bus stations in the Western 1930s, but the market itself is organized on older principles: each of the dozens of participating kolkhozes has its own set of counters, so that in the single market one can buy, say, carrots in perhaps fifty scattered locations; at each carrot counter there is a woman armed with an abacus and a counter-weight scale who necessarily spends most of her time doing nothing; and all too many of the fruits, ve-



STREET SCENE, VILNIUS



PRODUCE MARKET NEAR TROITSKY CATHEDRAL, LENINGRAD

getables and meats are of a quality unsellable in the West, or even on a Serbian piats. Yet that "new" market was surely far better (covered, heated, spacious) than most of the uncovered markets or street stalls I saw elsewhere, with their long waiting lines at almost every hour of the day except when (as in the photo above) nearly everything had already been sold. Indeed, that new Moscow collective-farm market was doubly an earnest of Khrushchevian "liberalism": not only for its "new architecture," but also because the very building of a new outlet for the kolkhoz farmers signified an end to the Stalinist pretense that food was available in state stores. "Well, what do you think of it?" asked my beaming guide. "1910" was my unguarded response; and I had to spend the next half-hour explaining why.

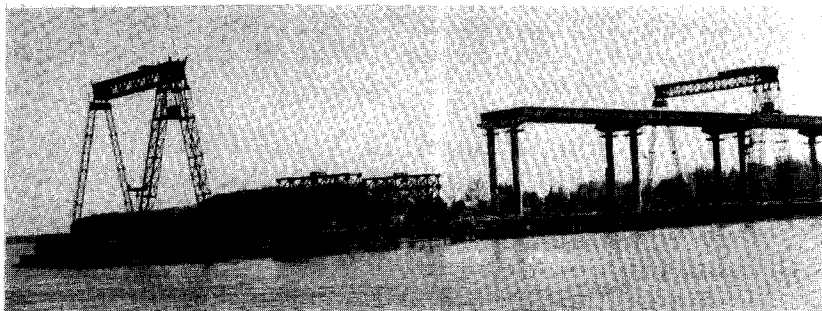
One does not, in fact, have to wander too far off the tourist trails to be aware of how much worse off agriculture is in Russia than in, say, Yugoslavia or even Hungary. I found it impossible, for example, to locate any orange juice in the Soviet Union (available here in canned, frozen and squash form all year round, as well as fresh in season). Russian menus are the first I have seen to carry such notations as "tea 5 kopecks, tea with sugar 6 kopecks, tea with lemon 10 kopecks," and when one gets away from Moscow and Leningrad the lemon may exist only on paper. (The Russians, who invented tea with lemon in benighted Tsarist times, could theoretically switch to the British habit of tea with milk; but then, according to Mr. Khrushchev, milk might be just as chancy.) One notices quickly enough even on the special Intourist four-language tourist menu how many of the meat dishes are croquettes or other forms of chopped meat reinforced by copious breadcrumbs; when one orders one of the "straight" meat courses, one is amused by the ingenuity with which french fries, succotash, parsley, etc. conceal the smallness of the meat portion; yet one is saddened rather than amused when one stumbles on a regular, non-tourist menu in a smaller town such as Rostov or Poltava (each

located in the midst of prime farm districts) and discovers that the ordinary Russian most of the time has only to choose among the various forms of croquettes, meat-substitutes, thick soups and vegetables. Small wonder that black bread and vodka comprise so large a part of the meal; and now, ten years after the launching of the Khrushchev "reforms," Russia is buying bread in the West. ("We're still paying for Stalin's mistakes in agriculture," was the official line; "our people are indignant and disgusted," said a non-party man.)

The difficulties of Soviet agriculture (absorbing 45 per cent of the work force) have, of course, been well advertised by Mr. Khrushchev himself. But even when one turns to one of his greatest "achievements" -- housing construction -- one realizes that Soviet "progress" is a very relative notion. To be sure, one is taken everywhere to new housing quarters, either completed in the last four-five years or under construction, and the sheer volume of such construction is impressive -- reminiscent of the growth of public housing projects under the Truman Administration. Yet what surprises one about Russian cities is not the new, but the old -- how much of the physical plant even in Moscow and Leningrad clearly dates to pre-Revolutionary times. (Considering Stalin's architectural taste, it is perhaps good from an artistic viewpoint that he built so little.) It is quite easy, walking through many a Russian street, to imagine oneself back in the times of Dostoyevsky. And if one ventures inside one of these older buildings, or is invited, one is appalled by the virtually complete lack of maintenance over those many years; what a contrast to France or Italy, where a shabby exterior often conceals interior splendors! I did not enter any of the new apartments, but I am told that complaints have already begun in them over lack of maintenance and faulty construction.

One further observation about the Khrushchev construction program. Its very symbol is the giant crane one sees poised over half-finished apartment buildings or factories; there are more such cranes, doubtless, than in the United States (where elevators do much of the same work). Yet one soon notices how many of those cranes are standing idle, and how many of those partly-built projects are completely empty of workmen. Two years ago, at the 22nd party congress, Mr. Khrushchev called for a halt to new construction projects, so that old ones could be finished; whatever his plan was at the time, it was obviously unsuccessful, for not merely the Soviet press but the naked eye reveal countless projects on which little or no work is being done -- some big factories, apparently, more than five years in the building and still incomplete.

If the landscape of the Russian city is disappointing, the only word for the country-



BRIDGE OVER THE DON AT ROSTOV

side is unbelievable. I could not imagine, after years of exposure to Communist propaganda and my own time in Yugoslavia, that so little had changed in the Russian countryside. Yet, on a two-hundred kilometer drive from Moscow to Yasnaya Polyana (via Podolsk and Tula on the main road to Kharkov), I was frankly shocked by the old, unpainted one- or two-room wooden peasant shacks, the rickety fences closing in the cherished private plots, the collective fields untended, the old women and children leading their cow or goat through the mud in search of some grass as if they had been doing so since time immemorial -- as, indeed, they have. Once in a great while one saw a new building of the kind one sees in nearly every Yugoslav village; I did not have to be told that this was the administrative headquarters of the sovkhos. On the boat ride from Rostov to Azov, the atmosphere was, if anything, even more timeless and somnolent: the fields broad, empty and incredibly fertile, jerry-built fishing shacks and landings on the shore, the wooden peasant houses liberally interspersed with thatched-roof huts. One felt in the opening pages of a Sholokhov novel, except that the novel was written thirty years ago, the events described happened fifty years ago, and one did not see those proud, prosperous Cossack horsemen who considered themselves -- and probably were -- the freest people in the Russian Empire.

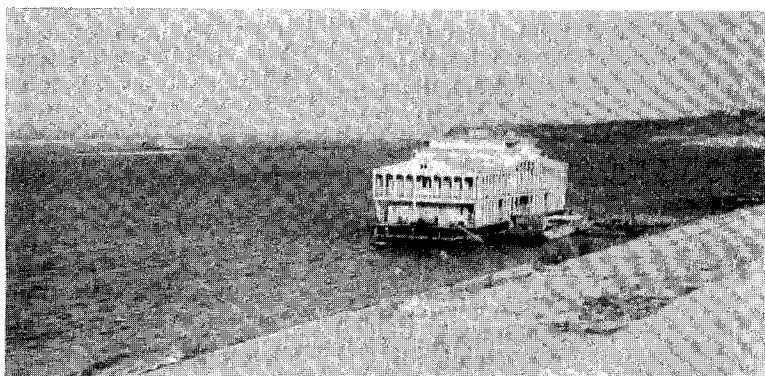
In fact, neither rural nor urban Russia today can be fairly compared with Russia fifty years ago, for not only have certain things (not much) been added by Stalin and Khrushchev, but certain vital elements have been subtracted as well. Foremost among them (I am speaking aesthetically now) are color and variety, which are as lacking in today's Russia as they are abundant in, say, Italy or Greece. I was particularly struck by this in watching two portrayals of pre-Revolutionary Russia in the Soviet Union: the first a performance of the Stravinsky-Fokine ballet Petrushka (wildly cheered in Leningrad in an almost-political demonstration), the second a new wide-screen color film called The Volga Flows. In each, the pre-Revolutionary scene was vivid, colorful, exciting; but in the film the contrast was striking between a brief pre-Revolutionary scene and a longer "varnished" scene of the Khrushchevian Utopia (everyone living in concrete-block pre-fabs). I rather suspect, after watching these and other performances, and observing the devotion not only of ordinary Russians but of the Soviet Government toward old Tsarist memorials (being restored at great cost), that among the Russian intelligentsia today there is a considerable, perhaps unconscious, nostalgia for the "bad old days." I should say, among the older Russian intelligentsia; for the young are bewitched by the American dream (dacron shirts, Louis Armstrong, a Ford in your future); and both with good cause in Russian reality.

I saw enough in Russia built "last year," "two years ago" or "three years ago" to accept the consensus that life has improved considerably since Stalin's death. But the largest question in my mind now is: Precisely what was accomplished before 1953? Was anything at all worth while created during those long years of "socialism in construction"? We all know the heavy price paid for Lenin's Civil War, for collectivization, the Great Purges, Stalin's German policy of 1931-33 and 1939-41: twenty million Russian lives is a low estimate, forty million a figure not beyond discussion,

and we do not speak of the other millions driven into emigration (because their gifts have enriched us all). Most Western observers seem compelled to agree that this heavy price was paid for something, although it is not quite clear just what: one gets a blurry image comprising neatly-plotted "growth" curves, Dnepropetrovsk, the Moscow Subway and Colonel Gagarin. Yet my own impression, after seeing a good slice of Russia (including the Volgograd hydro-power station and the Volga-Don canal) is that the Russian people paid this price for less than nothing: nothing, that is, that could not have been accomplished with much less strain in half the time by a government no more dynamic, imaginative or cruel than the present regimes of, say, Italy, Austria or Greece.

The myth of Soviet "progress" depends, of course, on the myth of pre-Communist backwardness in Russia -- and the latter fancy is at last being exploded by contemporary scholars no longer anxious to prove

(as were Russian democrats and Communists) that the Tsarist autocracy and the Russian "bourgeoisie" were completely incompetent. In fact, after 1890 and particularly between 1908 and 1914, Russia made enormous strides, including a higher growth rate than any achieved under the Soviet power. It was the world's



THE VOLGA AT VOLGOGRAD

leading producer of oil, was second only to the U.S. in rail mileage, fourth in pig-iron production (as early as 1900), etc.; three-fourths of its Army conscripts in 1914 were literate, and universal primary education seemed quite attainable by 1922. On Rostow's estimates, Russia was some thirty years behind the United States in launching industrialization, but the U.S. had been sixty years behind Britain and caught up in half a century. By this standard, Russia -- whose people were just as strong, serious and gifted as Americans, and whose natural resources far exceed those of the United States -- should have caught up (given the technical advantages of late-starters) in the late 1930s and by now forged far ahead. Even allowing for the devastation of 1914-21, the progress made under the NEP (1921-28) was such as to indicate that, had Stalin not launched his "great leap," Russia by now would have caught up or come ahead even under a (half-way-rational) Communist regime. That Western intellectuals were induced to believe precisely the opposite, is a tribute to Stalin's genuine gifts, which were those of a conspirator and daring propagandist rather than a builder of anything, let alone socialism.

I met no ordinary Russian who dared profess for a moment any serious belief that the Soviet Union under its present management could aspire to Western levels of output or income in the foreseeable future. Among Western observers in Moscow, in fact, the question was frequently raised whether the U.S.S.R. today is not actually

falling behind in the race: behind the Common Market countries if not the U.S., and not merely in consumer goods but in sophisticated modern industry.

The average Russian I met did not seem at all impressed by the Soviet growth statistics which so bemuse Western analysts; the Russians, after all, can make the proper allowances from life experience for wretched quality, lack of maintenance, unused capacity, transport bottlenecks, phony prices, padded employment rolls, wasted human effort (a day looking for a jar), and so on. If the Khrushchev regime enjoys a broad degree of popular support (acquiescence would be a better word), it is primarily because of the general conviction that things are improving. One should not under-rate non-economic factors here: the end of the Stalin terror, the "coexistence" line in foreign policy, the slight relaxation in the arts. However, in the economic field, too, the regime derives a great deal of support from the generally-held notion of steady improvement since Stalin's death. Much can be blamed on Stalin and "Stalinists," and even more on the war, at least for a few years more.

Yet the very nature of this support, it seems to me, poses deep problems for the regime in the not-too-distant future. If, as Gregory Grossman and other Western economists have shown, the major part of the economic improvement came in the early post-Stalin days-- before 1958 -- and there has actually been a tendency to increasing stagnation since then, the Soviet people will realize this soon enough. And if Soviet grain purchases in the West and apparent resignation from the moon race indicate a new set of troubles not foreseen by the leadership even a year ago, it will be difficult to continue going along the same old way. More than administrative reshuffling will be necessary, and such radical reforms as de-collectivization, decentralization in industry and a disengaged foreign policy will loom increasingly on the agenda. Whether these nettles will be grasped by the aging Mr. Khrushchev, or during the struggle to succeed him (which, properly speaking, has already begun), remains to be seen. But someone, somehow -- and soon -- will have to get Russia "moving again."

Cordially yours,



Anatole Shub

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