

# INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

NPC-1

Moscow State University  
Moscow, U.S.S.R.  
1 October 1984

- I. Introduction
- II. Arrival and living quarters
- III. Changes
- IV. Moscow theatre

## I. Introduction

I think it is wise in the opening paragraphs of this first report to say something about its readers, given their diversity. To the extent that I know the recipients of this report, they consist of Trustees, Fellows, and Members of the Institute of Current World Affairs, academic and administrative colleagues and friends, interested subscribers from a variety of professions, including the foreign service, journalism, international business, the arts, law, and my family, including three stepchildren, one of whom has spent six months of 1977-78 living with me in Moscow. Some, including perhaps Soviet officials who might at some point have access to these reports, have a fluent knowledge of Russian and experience in the Soviet Union; others have no knowledge of the language and at best fleeting knowledge of or interest in that culture.

As a result of this diversity, some aspects of each report will inevitably be more interesting than others to any given reader: certain facts of everyday life, self-evident to someone who has lived in a socialist society, are incomprehensible to many readers unless explained in some detail. Issues within contemporary poetry, for example, of minor interest to the casual reader, deserve discussion as one section of the monthly report, even if its readers are in the minority. I hope to find a common ground both interesting and accessible to all recipients of this report. I want, however, to call attention here to the heterogeneity of my audience, since in its own way it affects the manner in which material is presented.

## II. Arrival and Living Quarters

Let me begin with a brief description of the arrival in Moscow. Our Luft-hansa plane flew into Sheremet'ev Airport from Frankfurt. The passport officials were polite and curious (would Reagan win? where had I learned to speak Russian? did I like the Russian people?), and the formalities proceeded as usual until I noticed that I was standing in the one remaining customs line behind three American cowboys wearing lizard skin boots and carrying rifle cases. They grinned and assured me they would be held up for hours at customs. They planned to spend two weeks hunting game in the

---

Nancy Condee, a Fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs and Assistant Professor of Russian at Wheaton College, is studying contemporary culture and cultural politics in the Soviet Union.

Altai mountain region of Central Asia. I planned to spend a year living in a dormitory at Moscow State University. It occurred to me only gradually that they were as appalled by my reason for being in the customs line as I was by theirs. As their turn came and the customs officials settled into a microscopic analysis of the rifles, the rifle cases, the licenses to carry rifles, and so forth, one poor, young customs official was jerked away from his role as voyeur and assigned to deal with me and my paltry baggage. Eager to return to the rifles, he processed my papers quickly and admitted me officially into the U.S.S.R.

Eleven of us Americans, the smallest number in many years, are living and working at Moscow State University on Lenin Hills, to the southwest of Moscow. We each live in a single room slightly wider than my armspan—seven feet, perhaps—and about ten feet long. We share a shower, sink, and toilet with one other person. The contents of each room consists of two tables, two chairs, a daybed, a bookcase, a water carafe, a radio with one station, and a lamp. We each share a teakettle and a wastebasket with the next-door neighbor.

Cooking facilities (two four-burner stoves, a sink, an ironing board, and a work table, no refrigerator) are available for the forty-eight people in each section of the four wings. Normally an additional twenty-four would use these kitchens, but much of the University building is closed down for repairs and the extra rooms unoccupied.

The Americans, as well as scholars from other capitalist countries, "cap-countries" ("kapstrany") in bureaucratic parlance, have been assigned the fourteenth and fifteenth floors in one wing of the University building. While this arrangement does not matter particularly to the Westerners who have been here before and have Soviet friends, it tends to isolate Westerners who know no one, whose Russian language ability is limited, or who are not determined to get outside this comfortable terrarium of Western European social mores. This clustering of kapstrany researchers also makes us easily identifiable to Russians who, for a variety of reasons, befriend Westerners year after year. Each time we get on or off the elevators at these floors, the Soviet and East Europeans, acutely conscious of Western clothing, satchels, and briefcases, are reminded that these two floors represent another world.

The cafeteria, a cavernous hall in the basement of the University building, is one of the few places where both worlds mingle. Despite its drawbacks—long lines to pay for food in advance, long lines to receive the food, a limited menu, starchy diet—the cafeteria provides the majority of us living here with one sure place where we can get fed.

The menu varies little from day to day or from meal to meal: dinner of one evening becomes tomorrow's breakfast, whether beef stew, mashed potatoes, or fish. For all that, the meals are good. The first course includes a choice a choice of sausage, eggplant caviar, beet salad, radish or cucumber salad with sour cream. Soups usually include borshch or cabbage soup (shchi). The main courses offered may be stuffed peppers or cabbage, mushrooms in sour

cream, meatballs, chopped meat patties, rice, fried potatoes, or buckwheat kasha. As a way to combat meat shortages, Thursday has been declared Fish Day. Blessedly, its menu consists not only of overcooked cod, mackerel, and a mystery fish called khek (do any of my Russian-speaking readers know what this is in English?), but also of bliny, omelettes, and cheese patties (syrniki). In addition to being good, the meals are inexpensive: the combined cost of a first course, soup, main course, bread, and tea is usually under a dollar.

One of the fundamental paradoxes of this culture is the coexistence of two facts: the importance placed on food and the difficulty in obtaining it. I suppose one could argue that it is no paradox at all, that one fact necessarily follows from the other. In spite, however, of all the evidence that can be marshalled, whether economic (poor allocation of food resources), social (a shortage of people willing to be employed as cooks, busboys, or waiters), or historical (peasant attitudes growing out of a history of famine conditions), I cannot help but think, having finally gained admittance to a restaurant marked with the sign "No Seats Available" to discover an empty dining hall, that the Russian insistence on feeding you is at least matched by the Russian insistence on not feeding you. As the historian Carol Leonard has pointed out, food is prestige; to be fat is to communicate to others, "someone is feeding me."

The University building itself is said to be the largest building in the world, in capacity, that is, not in height. It is one of seven Moscow buildings which Americans, ignoring the fact that the original design for these monstrosities came from us, tend to refer to as Stalinist wedding-cake architecture. The central tower is thirty-two stories tall; the four wings, nineteen stories. Fantastically decorated with rostral columns, porticoes, Socialist Realist sculptures of earnest students from the early fifties, and various clock-shaped dials measuring temperature, time, humidity, and other less discernible facts of daily life, it resembles the main backdrop for the Emerald City of Oz. It contains about six thousand dormitory rooms, several cafeterias, a restaurant, movie theatre, swimming pool, bookshops, kiosks, food stores, lecture halls, the entire central administration offices of the University, and meeting halls for as many as 2,000 people. Both magnificent and oppressive, it can be seen from a great distance away, a late-Stalinist symbol of the authority of knowledge.

### III. Changes

Coming back to a country one has lived in for extended periods of time, one of course looks for signs of change and continuity. This is my seventh visit to the U.S.S.R., my first having been in 1967 when, as a high school student, I spent a summer camping through Belorussia, Russia, the Ukraine, and Moldavia. My last prolonged visit was in 1977-78, when I spent six months as a research scholar at Moscow State University and the A.M. Gor'kii Institute of World Literature on a grant from the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX). It is of course difficult to know from the changes one discerns in the course of daily life --the stuffed cabbage has less meat, the cutlery is heavier and made of better metal-- the extent to which one can draw any

beyond  
 kind of general conclusions about the society  $\wedge$  one's immediate lived reality. Moreover, having been here only two weeks at the time of this writing, I cannot yet draw much more than random conclusions, based on memory and observation. I find the opinions of Soviet friends and colleagues here unenlightening, perhaps in the same way that I myself would be unable to analyze the ways in which life in my own New England, urban, intellectual community has changed in the last six years. Some friends are pessimistic, others optimistic, but (I suspect) by nature, not as a result of shrewd and reliable analysis.

Some changes, however, are pronounced: young women dress in a manner which more closely corresponds to Western styles. Pleated skirts, tailored velvet jackets, and well-made cordoroy slacks have replaced the once rare and highly prized Western jeans, rolled up six to eight inches at the ankle because size used to be a consideration one could not afford. All kinds of European running shoes are also in fashion, the most valuable of which, according to one young Soviet friend, are a Yugoslav version of Adidas. Soviet consumer demands for Western clothing often produce combinations which seem odd to the Western observer and are understandable only by reference to the fact that both items, however incompatible, are nevertheless chic: heavy wool leg warmers and sneakers is my favorite of these combinations.

Of the other changes that could be catalogued, one in particular interests me. The metro announcement system has added an additional piece of friendly advice, designed, I assume, to raise the level of kul'turnost'. Following the usual pre-recorded female voice, warning passengers of the closing doors and announcing the next station ("Ostorozhno, dveri zakryvaiutsia; sleduiushchaia stantsia..."), a pre-recorded male voice periodically chimes in, informing a presumed male audience that "u nas" (that untranslatable Russian expression which means something akin to "chez nous," embracing everything from "at our house" to, here, "in our country") it is customary to give up one's seat to women and elderly people.

The substance of the announcement is not in itself significant: Russians are in fact more courteous than Americans in yielding their seats to those defined as needy, however much, in the case of women, that definition may be suspect. What interests me is the way in which, as a new cultural fact, that advice is privileged 1.) by means of an oral announcement, re-experienced anew each time by the passengers, rather than by means of a posted announcement, 2.) by means of its implicit male-to-male form, and 3.) by its explicit linkage of etiquette with national, and more specifically Russian norms. The foreigner, never mind that he abides by the same norm in his own country, is alerted to his status as foreigner (u nas); more important, the Russian is reassured that to be Russian and to be well-mannered are related concepts. Finally what interests me is that this particular notion of public etiquette can so easily coexist with extreme but acceptable acts of public rudeness: the very man who elbows his way into a subway car, bruising the departing passengers, is the same man who then rises to offer his seat to a woman perfectly capable of standing up during a brief metro ride. And, to be fair, the woman is as likely to have entered in the same

manner. Once inside, however, civilization as we know it continues, at least to the next metro stop.

#### IV. Moscow Theatre

Muscovites take theatre very seriously. Good theatre tickets are difficult to obtain: one doesn't even speak in Russian of buying tickets, although the sentence would be grammatically correct. One speaks precisely of obtaining them (dostat'). Even as an undergraduate at Leningrad State University in 1971-72, I was corrected for this Western inaccuracy in my speech. The implication is not that one obtains them through a scalper at inflated prices, as in New York or Washington, but rather that one's friends, relatives, co-workers, acquaintances, and other contacts are more important than the money paid for the ticket in determining whether you will see a desired production. Here the Russian proverb, "Instead of a hundred rubles, have a hundred friends" ("Ne imei sto rublei, a imei sto druzei") comes into its own.

Outside every theatre, crowds stand asking to buy extra tickets. The questions often begin at the metro exit, blocks away from the theatre. Inside the theatre hall, every seat is filled, including fold-down seats which block the aisles. With rare exceptions, the performances begin on time. As one Soviet dinner companion, hurrying me along with my meal, remarked, "It isn't Aeroflot, you know."

Despite its enthusiastic audience, however, contemporary Soviet theatre, like contemporary poetry is impoverished in comparison with prose. This in part explains the frequency with which playwrights turn to novels or short stories for material from which to write a play adaptation. The "raw material," if one can use that term for so finished a piece of writing as Iurii Trifonov's short story "The Exchange" ("Obmen"), for example,<sup>1</sup> provides a basic story line around which to build a production. It also provides a ready-made audience, eager to see a performance of a prose work they had only heard or read about, but had not been able to obtain.

The difficulty, of course, with the current trend toward adaptations is the way in which the works of fiction are transformed into theatre with no apparent concern for the relationship between the work's content and its original form, or the manner of its presentation to the presumed audience. The notion that one can take a novel and "tell the story on stage" is an extraordinarily literalist conception of the ways in which a text communicates. Ultimately, it is a conception which so overvalues content and remains so staunchly ignorant of the

---

<sup>1</sup>Iurii Trifonov (1925-81) is a contemporary Soviet fiction writer. His story "The Exchange," which appeared in the Soviet thick journal New World (Novii mir) in December, 1969, was adapted for the stage and produced at the Taganka Theatre, generally considered the most innovative Moscow theatre, thanks largely to its founder and former director, Iurii Liubimov, now in the West. It was also the home base of the popular poet, balladeer, and actor Vladimir Vysotskii, who died in 1980 at the age of 43. One wall of the Taganka entrance hall is still hung with photographs of Vysotskii. Visitors bringing flowers to lay in front of the photographs crowd around this area of the theatre at every Taganka performance I have attended since his death.

implications of a given form as to become self-parodistically Socialist Realist: "here is a good story," the playwright asserts, the way one might say "here is a good bottle of wine."

The value, if there is any, of decanting old prose into new bottles is that it brings many virtually unobtainable pieces of contemporary literature back into public discussion, transforming the isolated act of reading back into social experience, where the issues are discussed by a wider circle than those readers who had had the good fortune, or the one hundred friends, to read the original work. Unfortunately, that "wider audience" of theatre-goers may be only a slightly larger circle of the same urban intelligentsia that have the original novels squirreled away in their apartments.

A Moscow acquaintance tells of a teenage girl who, having seen the film "The Red and the Black," exclaimed to her friend, "Wasn't that great? And they say there's a book about it, too." A more fundamental problem than her ignorance, my friend maintains, is that the girl could not even get the book if she wanted to do so. The result is a reading public whose contact with controversial pieces of fiction is maintained only through a series of form-blind mediations, a fact which, unfortunately, is not controversial. Of those play adaptations which are running this fall, only the Taganka's production of Trifonov's "The Exchange" reflects any interest in or gift for the presentation of narrative as drama, a form with a different set of problems than that of fiction.

Despite this dramatic literalism, one contemporary play, based on a novel by the writer Chingiz Aitmatov, has attracted considerable attention here in Moscow. I would like to discuss it briefly here in concluding this report.

According to Kirghiz legend,<sup>2</sup> young, male prisoners captured by the Central Asian tribe Zhuan'zhuan are transformed into warrior-slaves by means of an unusual and excruciating form of torture: a piece of stretched, wet camel skin is adhered to the shaved head of the prisoner. As the camel skin dries, it tightens around the skull, forming an impenetrable cap. Hairs that grow from the shaved head cannot pierce the camel skin and so grow backward into the scalp. As a result, the prisoner undergoes a complete loss of memory concerning his past, his family, his ethnic traditions, even his own name. These slaves, called mankurts, make ideal warriors, able to carry out any act of violence without protest. One version of the legend tells of a woman, Naiman-Ana, whose son had disappeared and was presumed dead. After a long search, she discovered him a prisoner of the Zhuan'zhuan tribe, and already transformed by them into a mankurt. She painstakingly tried to restore his

---

<sup>2</sup>Kirghizia is one of the fifteen republics that make up the Soviet Union. It is slightly smaller than West Germany and has a population, mostly Turco-Mongol, of about two and a half million. It is located in Soviet Central Asia, bordering on the west with the Soviet republics Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tadzhikistan, and on the east with the People's Republic of China. Its economy is largely agricultural—corn, sugar beet, cotton, karakul sheep—and its industry is based on the mining of non-ferrous metals.

memory, repeating to him his name and the name of his father, Donenbai. Learning of her presence, the Zhuan'zhuan ordered the young mankurt to murder her. Dying, she was transformed into a white bird that still flies over the steppes in that region, and whose cry, "Donenbai, Donenbai," still attempts to remind her mankurt son of his lost heritage.

The legend of Naiman-Ana forms the central theme of the play The Day Lasts Longer than a Hundred Years (I dol'she veka dlitsia den'), which makes its premiere this fall. Written in novel form by the Kirghiz writer Chingiz Aitmatov,<sup>3</sup> the work was adapted for the stage by the dramatist A.M. Mambetov.

Both the play and the original novel have been the focus of enormous interest on the part of the Russian reading public for a number of reasons. First, it is an excellent work, written by a member of a national minority, long considered uncivilized and uneducated by many members of the urban Russian intelligentsia. Second, the work is an outspoken defense of the importance of ethnic consciousness, be it Kirghiz or Russian,<sup>4</sup> in preserving human values. According to some readers, the work is much more outspoken than other national minorities, Ukrainian or Estonian, for example, might be permitted to be. Third, and, I think, most important, it addresses a theme which is of increasing vitality in Soviet literature, namely the theme of memory, of preserving what remains of the past for the sake of future generations. Whether the broad appeal of this theme is traced to the aging process of the Soviet baby boom, now, like my generation, in its mid-thirties, or traced to a cross-generational search for roots—ethnic, religious, pre-war, or even pre-revolutionary—or whether it is explainable in terms of a reaction against contemporary technological incursions into daily life, the primacy of memory as a kind of cultural compass for human behavior dominates contemporary literature in prose, poetry, and drama.

---

<sup>3</sup>Chingiz Aitmatov (1928- , Sheker, Kirghizia) is a bi-lingual novelist who has been successful in bringing his own ethnic culture to Russian readers in a way which makes it both intriguing and palatable to them. His father, a Party official, was a victim of Stalinism and died in 1937. After completing his education at a veterinary technical school in 1948, Aitmatov began to write short stories, the first of which began to appear in print in 1952. From 1956 to 1958, he attended the Gor'kii Literary Institute in Moscow, a university-level institution for writers. His most important early works were Dzhamilia (1958) and the collection Tales of the Mountains and the Steppes (Povesti gor i stepei, 1962), for which he was awarded the Lenin Prize in 1963. Later works include The White Steamship (Belyi Parakhod, 1970) and the play The Ascent of Fujiyama (Voskhozhdenie na Fudziiamu, 1973), written together with the playwright Mukhamedzhanov. Aitmatov's novel, The Day Lasts Longer than a Hundred Years, appeared in the November issue of the thick journal Novii mir in 1980, and in book form in 1981, published by both Molodaia gvardiia and Khudozhestvennaia literatura publishing houses. In book form, the novel's title is Buranyi Siding (Buranyi Polustanok).

<sup>4</sup>The work does not explicitly privilege Kirghiz culture and is not, in that sense, a work of ethnic chauvinism. It rather stresses the primacy of cul-

Aitmatov's The Day consists of a double narrative, an unlikely combination of Kirghiz folk custom and Soviet science fiction. The more developed of these two stories is told by the hero, Edigei, an old railroad worker, about the death and attempted burial of his old friend and co-worker, Kazangap. Edigei's concern that Kazangap be buried according to Kirghiz custom meets with unexpected obstacles: boorish indifference on the part of Kazangap's Russified son, family squabbles which override the solemnity of the occasion, and, finally, the refusal on the part of the authorities to permit the burial of Kazangap's body in the traditional burial ground, now surrounded by a launching site.

The second story of the novel, alternating with the first, is concerned with a space flight launched from the same space center to which Edigei has travelled with the body. Functioning as a veiled description of historical Russian xenophobia, this second story tells of the astronauts' discovery of a highly developed, extraterrestrial civilization, their success in making friendly contact with it, and the ground control's ensuing decision to cut the astronauts off permanently from any contact with Earth.

In his development of these two stories, which run parallel with each other like tracks and merge finally at the horizon, Aitmatov presents us with an interesting structural convergence at the end of the work. The goal of the first story--the traditional Kirghiz burial--is frustrated by modern technology, indifferent to Kirghiz custom. As a result, the unthinkable happens: the dead man returns from the cemetery to be buried in a makeshift grave in the side of a hill. The astronauts' goal in the second story--peaceful contact with an alien civilization--is frustrated by the cultural insularity and provincialism of ground control. Here, too, the unthinkable occurs: the astronauts are excluded from human contact and buried alive in space.

The mankurt legend, told to us in passing as one of several anecdotal moments, becomes charged with ethical significance by the work's end: to lose touch with one's cultural heritage, as does Kazangap's "educated" son, to lose sight of the importance of both its preservation and its propagation, as do the ground commanders of the second story, is to engage in the transformation of the self into a mankurt, deprived of custom, ritual, and, finally, any element recognizable as human. Invulnerable and inhuman, these characters stand in opposition to the work's heroes, whose vitality has been redefined as powerlessness. While it is clear with whom Aitmatov's sympathies lie, his work is a lament for the losses of a Kirghiz past and the inevitable losses of an internationalist future.

Since the draft of this report, I have been told that the play has just been removed from the theatre's repertoire. Like much of Moscow hearsay, this could mean anything, or nothing at all. Perhaps there will be accurate information

---

tural traditions in whatever form they take--legends, burial rituals, kinship structures, and implicitly, literature--as an integral part of the "human."

later, for inclusion in a future report.

I would welcome comments, corrections, or suggestions from recipients of this report. I am working here, on the one hand, without an abundance of Western research and reference tools, and, on the other hand, with more Soviet material than I could understand in many years. My mailing address is:

Nancy Condee (IREX)  
Press and Culture  
U.S. Embassy--Box M  
Helsinki 00140  
FINLAND

Sincerely,



Nancy Condee

Received in Hanover 10/15/84