

Subject: A Trip to the USSR and CSSR in Aug/Oct 1968

Source: An American student, at present studying in Europe, in his 20's, a 3rd generation "Russnak" (his ^{grand}parents came to this country from Carpatho-Ukraine)

Date: 26 Nov 1968

I present here a series of my impressions and observations from my visit to the Soviet Union and to Czechoslovakia. I hope that they correspond adequately to your interests. The nature of my journey is this. I stayed 2½ weeks as a guest with my relatives in a small town in the Carpatho Mountains and then traveled 3½ weeks as a tourist to Kiev, Moscow, Leningrad, Novgorod, and Uzhgorod. After this I visited Presov, the High Tatras, Liberec and Prague during a 2 week journey through Czechoslovakia.

I crossed the Czechoslovak - Soviet border at Cop on August 20, the morning before the invasion. After leaving the Czechoslovak customs, the train stopped for about 20 minutes along the tracks between the two countries. Two soldiers with guns and lanterns searched under and between the cars on each side of the train. At a distance of 50 yards on each side of the train a soldier patrolled the length of the train. Finally at Cop, I was then taken individually by four men who examined every article in my suitcase and in my pockets. Except for asking to see my pockets pulled inside-out, they did not search my person. They examined carefully every book and paper in my belongings, reading every letter I had with me. They asked me why I was carrying a Church Slavonic text of the New Testament. When I replied that I needed it to go to church, they reluctantly put it back in the suitcase. I later gave this New Testament to a parish priest. They took my two cameras behind a screen and used one photo to check the film inside. Several times throughout the affair they asked me if I had any money or gold that I did not show them, stressing its importance and seriousness. This entry stands in contrast with my exit on October 1, at the Uzhgorod crossing where they merely checked my money, some papers, a notebook and a box containing a record player.

The small town in which I lived for 2½ weeks is located in the southwestern part of the Carpatho mountains. It has a population of 5,000 and is a region center. There is relatively no industry in the town. People who are not employed in administration, education, or public service work on the collective farms. Almost every family owns a piece of property at the home, most of which has been retained within the last years. Many families own their own chickens, geese, pig, a goat and a cow. They use wood cook and wood stoves, though gas stoves are more common. Clothes are washed in a simple tub or down at the river bed. The children study for 8 years in schools of their national language. Those who do not go directly on to work go on to Middle School and then to the university at Uzhgorod or Lvov.

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As anywhere, the life in this small town is simpler than in the larger cities in the Soviet Union. It is centered more on the family. It is more attached to tradition and to common sense than to rational science. It is less penetrated by the soviet ideology and system. (One exception to this is, of course, the administrators of the town). This may be due also to the fact that Sub Carpathia was annexed and submitted to the soviet system only after the 2nd World War. I was unable to observe this aspect so well in the other regions of the Soviet Union, for as a tourist I could never reach this level of the population. As a rule, however, all the people conform to the soviet ideology and system externally in order to live and work in the society. The simple factory worker or collective farmer is allowed more latitude, as long as he doesn't directly oppose the system. He can go to church and is more free to express disagreement with the system in his close groups. But anyone with a responsible position in the society must hide all expression of non materialistic philosophy or of religious faith, must defend soviet policy and ideology in public whether he agrees with it or not, and often will join the communist party for the sole reason of having a better job and a better life. I will give some concrete examples. One discontent worker was threatened his job if he spread his discontent over wages among the other workers. One young woman, a librarian, was scolded and threatened her job because she attended church services. The same charge was giving a bad example, especially to the young. A young teacher hides his faith and plans to join the Party in order to have a better, fuller future. Many of his friends have done the same. A young doctor is a believer, but was afraid even to visit the priest's home with me for fear of starting damaging rumors about himself in the town. My cousin often defended soviet ideology and policy when others were present, and then laughed at the same things with me when we were in private. With all of my relatives and friends, I talked politics and religion only behind closed windows and doors. I was continually warned by my family not to speak these topics in the streets or with anyone outside of the family.

With the limited contact I had with the people in Uzhgorod, Kiev, and Novgorod, I found quite a different spirit in the larger cities. In the first city I met a man who is a doctor. In Kiev I became good friends with a German instructor at the University. In the third city I met a young communist worker. I received the impression here that more people, especially the younger people, tend to accept the rigid soviet society as normal, as the basis of their frame of reference, without putting it at a distance and passing a serious critical judgment on it, as did the people I met on a more intimate level in the small town. They, of course, admit imperfections and some injustices when they are presented with facts, but these

are minor and temporary, and will be eliminated as the soviet society develops. From speaking with these people, I have drawn this conclusion. To the extent that the people are convinced of their society, they speak politics and religion with me openly in the streets and in the cafés, even when I become very critical. To the extent that they themselves are deeply critical of the society, they feel less secure and discuss these matters only in strict privacy. Also older people tend to be more cautious than younger people.

To describe life in soviet society, one must view it from two different points of view, from the material aspect and from the spiritual or intellectual aspect. From the material point of view the life is satisfactory and improving every year. Automobiles are very few and many household appliances are lacking, but radios and televisions are quite common. It can be said in general that they can buy the same things that we have. At the same time, the quality is sacrificed to put everything on the market in quantity. The average cost of living for a family for one month is about 200 to 250 rubles. Since the average wage is about 120 rubles a month, both husband and wife must work. The only woman I met who did not work was the wife of a minister in the government. Some jobs, especially in the government, pay as much as 300 rubles a month. Because of these financial conditions, the families almost never have more than two children. But the people seem to freely accept these conditions and live satisfactorily from the material point of view.

One restriction which the people in general feel most strongly is the restriction on their movement and travel. This is particularly true in regards to their travel to the West. Many people would like to visit the West and some have saved enough money for a trip. In theory everything is possible in their society. With a wishful hope they apply for their visa, but in fact they never receive it.

From the spiritual point of view the people are free and satisfied only to the extent that they accept themselves the soviet ideology and policy. Spiritual liberty is more easily sacrificed than material well-being, and a certain degree of material well-being must be attained for the people on a whole to reflect and demand spiritual liberty, e.g. Czechoslovakia. The soviet system gives the people just enough material well-being to be satisfied, but not enough to be free for other things. This is much more than the people had, especially after the 2nd World War, and they are captured by the newness and greatness of science and material progress. Things which we take for granted are new and great conquests for their society. They are very conscious of building a new material society from

the old prerevolutionary society and from the ruins of the war. This fascination leads many of the people to accept the absoluteness of material and reason.

In general, all people that I met in the Ukraine and in Russia were convinced of a socialistic society and would not want to return to a capitalistic society, especially since the gov't. informs them of only the negative aspects and scandals in our society. These same people, however, are critical to greater or lesser degrees of the social and personal injustices in the soviet socialism. This depends on their awareness to these injustices.

There is an interesting aspect to Sub Carpathia's annexation by the Soviet Union. I heard from young people and official sources that the majority of the people there, being Ukrainian, signed a petition to be joined to the Soviet Ukraine. An older man told me, however, that the petition that was passed around in his town after the war was said to be a petition to receive food, with promises that everything would be much better if he signed the petition. This turned out to be the said petition.

I will now tell how the Ukrainian and Russian people think on various questions. It is difficult to generalize from a few individual opinions on a question, but these opinions do present a partial view of the currents of thought in the society. On the question of Czechoslovakia, I found the people in the small Carpathian town had a great deal of understanding and sympathy for the people of the occupied land. In public they repeated the ideas from the soviet radio and press, but behind closed windows and doors at home they listened to the Czech and Western radio and admitted the injustice of the soviet occupation.

With my friend in Kiev, I found a definite lack of understanding and sympathy for the Czech and the Slovaks. The Soviet Union had the right to correct her socialist brother for stepping out of line. My friend gave and seemed to be convinced of the attitude of the soviet press. The occupation was a gesture of brotherhood and peace, for if Czechoslovakia had continued to drift, it would certainly have led to war. German soldiers were already present in Czechoslovakia and a real counterrevolution was taking place. Czechoslovakia was planning to give a portion of her land to West Germany. The Western capitalists were beginning to establish themselves in the country. There was a dangerous, liberal minority in the country corrupting and taking control of the whole society.

SECRET

The young communist I met in Novgorod was very sincere and surprisingly objective. He himself was against the occupation and a good number of his fellow communists considered it a big error. He said that in their meetings they can discuss and oppose proposed actions of the Party, but, as in this case, once something is an accomplished fact, discussion ends. It is then too late to officially oppose the action. When I objected that there should still be a legal means to evaluate an accomplished policy and to express objection, as we have in the West, he agreed and added this to the reforms that their system should have.

The people expressed various attitudes toward their own society. Because of their relative material well-being, all the people are convinced of the value of a socialistic society. The people in the Carpathian town admitted that their life was better under Czechoslovakia between the wars, but only the older people can make this comparison. Since the war their life has been so hard that they are quite happy now from the material point of view. They value such things as free university education and free medical care very highly.

The official or public spirit toward the soviet society is one of uncritical praise. Nowhere outside of intimate conversation did I hear anything negative about the society. Everything is good and nothing is bad. Everything is possible and nothing is impossible in this society. I even pushed one lawyer to guarantee me without a doubt that it is possible for a professed non marxist christian to hold a top position in the soviet government or in the soviet soviet society. It almost becomes a complex with some officials. When I attended a wedding in the Carpathian town, I met the chief of the town's militia. He said, "What are you going to say when you return home? That our weddings here are bad? You can see that our weddings here are very good." As I concluded a meeting with an official of the communist party in the town and walked away, he kept repeating the phrase, "Everything is good here. Everything is good."

The doctor in Uzhgorod described the new man that the soviets are forming and the new society that they are building. This will be a new society of material and spiritual well-being. The people will have all that they want and will live happily and peacefully with an orientation toward the social good rather than toward an egoistic personal good. The seemingly strict controls that the government imposes are justified as the most direct and efficient way to achieve this common goal of the people. With this discussion we also concluded that atheism is accessory to the socialistic goals of communism. My friend mentioned that they are now becoming conscious

SECRET

of the problem of the poor and developing countries of the world, and that this must be integrated into their vision and their social program.

While I was in an Uzhgorod café with another friend, I asked him about a name carved into the table top. He replied that this was an Ukrainian nationalist who died in exile. He said that there is still a very strong feeling for an independent Ukraine, especially in the 3 oblasts of Galacia. He said that this feeling is less predominate, but that it exists also among the people of the Great Ukrainá.

When I criticised the injustices of the soviet society against religion and against man's spirit and intellect, my communist friend in Novgorod admitted the many reforms that they must have. He explained that the times of Stalin were intollerable. Khrushchev was better, but still very bad. Breznev was an improvement, but not enough. Now the young communists wait for Breznev to be replaced and for more reforms to come.

I found that all the soviet people truly and sincerely want peace and friendship between West and East, and consider this also to be the basic spirit behind soviet policy. The aggressive, imperial West bears full responsibility for the tensions and troubles in the world. There is a wide gap between the spirit of the soviet people and the spirit of the soviet international policy. The soviet people do not perceive this difference.

In regard to the attitude of these people toward the West, there is one question which every person everywhere asked me. They asked for an explanation of the assassination of John and Robert Kennedy. This is truly the biggest american scandal which reached every level of their society. It witnesses the especially warm feeling that they had for John Kennedy. Their usual explanation of his assassination is that President Johnson or the american government itself disposed of him.

I was asked much less about the war in Vietnam, for which it was difficult to find a common ground to begin a discussion. The general opinion is that this is an aggressive american war against a poor, suffering people. Although the Soviet Union finances the other side of the war, she is free from all responsibility in the affair because she has no soldiers there. One Ukrainian fellow said that he would gladly volunteer to fight with the people of Vietnam against the american aggressors. I spoke with a director of Intourist in Moscow. He was at once offended by the act of american aggression, sympathetic for the waste of american lives and american means, and triumphant over the waste of american greatness and strength in this affair.

Many people asked for an explanation of the assassination of Martin Luther King. After one young man strongly criticised the racism in the States, I changed the subject and worked

SECRET

around to ask him about the negroes from Africa studying in soviet universities. He openly confessed that he did not like to be around them and was glad that none of them lived in the Soviet Union.

In the U.S. elections, they were not enthusiastic about either candidate, They showed less confidence in Nixon.

The people everywhere were very interested to hear about life in Western society. They hear only about the negative aspects and know that there is more to the reality. Seeing how I am studying and traveling in Europe, they were very surprised to learn that my father is a simple worker. At one public gathering in the Carpathian town, I was approached by a group of young men who wanted to know my opinion about questions in religion and philosophy, and to ask about american life. As I explained about men's clothing in the States, a Party official in the town began listening in. He immediately took me by the arm and literally dragged me off to another group in the gathering. The German instructor in Kiev spent all the time with that he could. He explained this himself. I was the first American in the flesh that he ever met, and he wanted to know I think and live. He enjoyed hearing my opinions, even if he didn't agree with them, because he never heard them personally expressed before.

After 50 years of soviet rule, Christianity has a limited but solid foundation among the people of the Ukraine and Russia. It still has a great struggle ahead of itself because of the social pressures working against it. Antireligious and atheistic propaganda have full public rights while the Church is confined to the limits of its own institutions. It becomes more and more isolated from the younger generation and the current of modern life. There are 6 main arguments given against religion. First, religion is only for the old, superstitious people. No young person would associate himself with them by going to church. Second, there is no need for religion. The people live a good life without religion, so why should they have it. Religion is completely reduced to the objective level of function and reason and loses its significance. Third, religion is against science and modern life. Forth, religion is a deep alienation from communism and its ideals. Fifth, the scandels from the morality of the clergy are presented as representative of the Church and of religion. Sixth, History shows that the Church has always sided with the rulers and the oppressors of the people. It has never been the Church of the workers. Even during the war, the fascist germans attacked them under the motto, "Gott mit uns". The Orthodox Church, and the others as well, is isolated within its own institutions and has no means to correct inaccurate and rash charges or to defend itself in society.

SECRET

The average young soviet has been kept from religion and exposed to atheistic propaganda. Even if this has led him to indifference or to a middle position critical of both sides, he has no contact with the life of the Church to sense the subtle persecution. He is therefore convinced that the Church is completely free and unhindered. There is a separation between Church and State, and if the Church is free if she doesn't oppose or mix with the State. In actuality, this separation of Church and State means the total predominance of the State and the extinguishing isolation of the Church.

But the extensive measures to extinguish religion are in fact ^{not} very ineffective. In Novgorod, a city of 119,000 people and only one functioning church, my friend and I asked several people on the street if they believed in God. An elderly man was afraid to answer. A girl of about 18 years answered "yes", and walked quickly away. For a young couple, the wife answered "yes" she believes but her husband doesn't, and they hurried off before her husband could say a word. Two young fellows of about 20 years simply laughed at such a ridiculous question. Another young fellow, about 17 years old, answered "no", but showed interest in the question. I took the opportunity to ask him why he didn't believe. He thought for a minute, but couldn't answer. Finally he said that his grandmother and mother believe, but that he was a pioneer and is now in the komсомол, so he just doesn't believe. My friend then pulled me away and told me not to disturb the boy. In another city a young worker explained to me his simple reasoning. The communists say that one should believe in communism and not in God. He sees that after his death there will not be any communism, but there will be God.

The priests take a positive outlook towards the situation of religion in the Soviet Union. The persecutions brought a much needed purification and helped form a new, healthier, more christian Church. There is only a minority of confessing christians, but they are body of convinced and strong believers. They doubt whether their condition is much worse in fact than that of the Churches in the West. They admit the pressures against them and hope for better conditions in the future. They say that there has been a bit of progress in the past 3 or 4 years.

I will add a few comments on my 2 week visit to Czechoslovakia, 6 weeks after the occupation. All the people I met in Prásov, the High Tatras, Liberec, and Prague were completely against the occupation and completely for Svoboda, Dubček, Smerkovsky, and Černik. They consider this occupation in the same light that ^{they} considered the german occupation years back.

It took them completely by surprise and left them very disheartened. One young worker in Liberec, a member of the Communist Party, said the only solution is a 3rd World War or a complete change in soviet policy including the removal of Breznev. The only thing that the occupation accomplished, in his opinion, was to destroy the Czechoslovak-Soviet friendship. Everyone verified that the counterrevolution as well as all the other charges brought against them by the soviets are mere myths. No arms were raised anywhere against the occupying soldiers, although no one gave them anything to eat or drink during the first 3 or 4 days of the occupation. When the troops raised the soviet flag in the center of Presov, the students took it down and tore it to pieces. When they raised their flag in Liberec, the people drove their cars over it. In Presov a tank ran over a 2 year old girl. They said that the driver of the tank committed suicide afterwards. There is a plaque and flowers where she died. I heard that in Bratislava a 16 year old girl in a group of fist shaking, stone throwing youth was shot and killed. The soviet press reported that the girl was coming to meet the occupying troops with flowers when the counterrevolutionaries shot her. In Liberec nine people who lined the streets shaking their fists and throwing stones were shot and killed. At the place where each was killed is placed a plaque with flowers. On the city hall is a plaque with all nine names and many flowers. The plaques read in Czech, "In memory of the tragic death of on August 21, 1968." Inclosed with this letter is a photocopy of two poems concerning Breznev composed by the boys in a gymnasium in Liberec.

All over the country radio and television stations were wantonly damaged. At the Prague airport alone an engineer told me that there was 35 million kronen damage.

A woman from Prague explained the social pressure against those who collaborate with the occupying troops. One director of the company where she works invited three troops into his office to talk and drink. When this became known, he was severely scolded by a higher director and his salary was dropped 200 kronen a month.

This woman said that at the beginning of the occupation, a first division of troops entered Prague, fired at the buildings, and then withdrew. A second division of troops arrived and were told that the counterrevolutionaries had done all of the damage that they found in the city.

This same woman was an eye witness to the biggest violence in Prague. This occurred when the occupying troops approached to take control of the radio station on Vinohradská ulice.

SECRET

A line of cars and other vehicles were parked in front of the radio station to block the way for the trucks and tanks of the advancing troops. This was unimportant, for the troops entered and took control of the radio station on foot. Just then an automobile crashed into a streetcar on the scene and began burning. The fire spread to one of the tanks, and before they could extinguish it there was a big explosion. The troops immediately opened fire on the crowd, killing and wounding many before they could retreat. During this incident, two large buildings on opposite sides of Vinohradsky Mlca, about a block away from the radio station, were completely burned out and the surrounding buildings heavily shelled. When I asked her if she thought the tank was intentionally set on fire, she could not say. Enclosed with this letter are negatives of one of the burned out buildings and of the damage done to the National Museum. (The windows have all been replaced). There is also inclosed a negative of the occupying vehicles on the West German border, at Cheb.

People often asked the soldiers why they had come. Some replied that they were told that there was a real, military counterrevolution under way. Many others answered that they did not even know that they were entering Czechoslovakia. They thought that they were just moving for maneuvers. I heard many accounts which said that the occupying soldiers disapproved of the occupation, and even some reports that soldiers had committed suicide.

With the occupation six weeks old, it was already necessary to distinguish fact from fiction and event from legend. I heard that one store keeper told a soldier to go back, leave his gun and change out of his uniform before he would serve him. One café owner invited a whole group of soldiers in and got them stone drunk. He then sawed off all of their guns. When the commander awoke, he shot himself rather than answer for his responsibility. It is a fact that the people removed and changed directions of the road signs during the invasion. I heard that one polish division followed the road signs, made a circle, and went back to Poland. There were conflicts among the soldiers of the different occupying armies, especially between the Soviets and the others. There was always a soviet commander with each of the non soviet divisions, to be sure that they carried out their orders. I heard that when two polish soldiers were charged with violating a Czech girl, the soviet commander shot them on the spot.

Jokes were already being passed around. For example, why did the Soviets station 15 tanks at every baby hospital? To shoot all the counterrevolutionaries when they are born,

I conclude ...

SECRET

Balada

Byl jednou jeden kouzelník,
ten v Kremly bydlel v hradu
líbal se v Čierne' nad Tisou
a pripravoval zrady

Na hlavě vždycky másto měl
a náruč plnou kvítí
a na rtech sliby přátelství
a na hranicích šíky.

Tomu se jednou zastesklo
tam ve Štalinských slojích
i chtěl se jetu podívat
kam demokraté plují.

Od jedna slyšel o zemi
kde básník volně zpívá
lid o svých věcech rozhodne
a strana jenom kývá.

Vzal do ruky svůj hrozny' kyj,
v tu zemi poslal tanky

a těšil se jak OSN
umlu' svět vešem,
a zprávy o svém vítězství
pošle pak celým světem.

Však běda jaká proměna,
hned celý svět je proti
a celý národ jedno je
a nebojí se smrti.

Kam vkročil zas ten starý zvyk
zas krev a smrt a slzy -
i rozpláče se kouzelník
a sám si hlavu srazí.

Rusák,

sedí rusák na gazíky

Smrdí na sto konů

někde ukrad hajzl papír
a teď piše olemů.

Moji draží věřte mi

u srdce mě bolí,

čekali jsme tady slávu,

a teď chra'pem v poli.

Sníl jsem o tom

jak zde s dírkou

ztrávím svůj čas v kině

kam se houkná, všude nupis

„Rusové jsou svine“

Jeden den nám nadá'rají

druhý den jsou tiše

chlásta'me tu vodu zlouží

a kručí nám v břiše.

Je to divné máme tanky

ruce, ale prázdne'

jsme tady už skoro týden

ale vyprávěny ...

čekali jsme, že nás budou
vítat chlebem sůl;
ale lidi po nás plivou
a má'rají holi'.

Teď už trochu chá'peme,
proč jsme se sem epali
a jak nás ti páni v Kremle
pěkně oklamali.

Žeňa věř mi, jsem Ti věrný
a jsem jako z dubu
ty buď taky, nebo jinak
rozbiju Ti hubu

Pane Bože u tanky my
stoje' pěkná Máina
na tank piše,
že jsem svine, tak ja' končím

Váňa