

Obstacle Course for Attachés

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The Soviet system of devious techniques to circumscribe the overt observations of foreign experts.

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It may be useful, now that it seems possible the Soviet Union may one of these days agree to admit nuclear inspection teams to its territory, to review the kinds of obstacles it regularly strews in the path of other legitimate trained foreign observers, the military attaches. As Soviet officials have already given voice to their suspicion that any nuclear inspectors will be bent on spying, so they have taken the attitude, in their obsession with secrecy, that the attaches are spies when they exhibit an interest in matters which in most other countries lie open in the public domain. Hence, although as a bow to international usage they accept the military attaches of foreign diplomatic missions, they severely circumscribe their opportunities to travel and make observations—a traditional attaché activity ever since the system came into being during the Napoleonic era.

Soviet measures to limit the observations of military attaches fall into two categories. First, there are express legal. Proscriptions on attaché movement and activities—off-limits areas, travel registration, prohibitions on photography, etc. Second, there is a large body of unannounced restraints — administrative, psychological, and physical — which take up where the legal obstacles leave off. It is this second category of obstructive techniques over and above the formal restrictions which I

shall illustrate from my own experience in Russia as American Air Attaché from October 1956 to October 1958.

Manipulating transportation. This is one of the most common methods of interference through administrative measures after an attaché has obtained formal permission to travel. For example, you have made reservations for a flight in daytune from Moscow to Baku, but at the last minute you find that your seat has been switched to a night plane. If you announce your intention of waiting for the first available day time flight, you are informed that all day flights are sold out "for the indefinite future." The same thing happens on trains. Sometimes the schedules are altered to keep you from passing points of interest in daylight. I have been on trains which for no apparent reason pulled into a siding and waited until dark, to the bewilderment of Russian fellow-passengers and even some members of the crew. Similarly, civil air flights have altered their routes or skipped scheduled stops in perfectly good weather for no other reason than to deny us observation of some inconveniently located installation.

Compartment companions. Rarely are attachés able to secure a compartment to themselves on a Soviet train, no matter how far in advance they book transportation. The Soviet citizens who turn up to share a compartment are in most cases readily identifiable as security agents. They keep the attaché under constant scrutiny during waking hours and occasionally can be found going through his belongings in the middle of the night. An auxiliary practice is that of splitting up foreign travelers: even American husbands (including myself) have on occasion been obliged to spend the night in one compartment and their wives in another with male Russian companions. This sort of thing naturally does nothing to endear the watchdogs of Soviet security to members of the attaché corps, and run-ins with them have been frequent. After one such skirmish with a particularly obnoxious security type in the Caucasus, I was called a "hooligan" and other uncomplimentary names in the Soviet press, a publicity measure which serves to put psychological pressure on the attaches as well as to foster among the Soviet populace the desired attitude of suspicious vigilance toward foreigners.

Timely interruption technique. Even if an attaché and his friends or family have managed to secure a train compartment without Soviet company, their privacy is seldom respected for long. Whenever the train approaches the industrial section of a city, for example, the car

attendants suddenly find it necessary to tidy up your compartment. If the door happens to be locked they let themselves in with a pass key, so great is their urge to look after your comfort. The window always seems to need the most attention, and they swipe away at it with a dust-rag, effectually blocking the view, until you have passed through the factory district.

If this routine cannot be stretched out long enough, there is a variation which I encountered once while traveling through a large industrial city on the Volga. Factories were strung out for several miles on the outskirts of the city, among them a big aircraft plant. It stood alongside the tracks, offering about the same view you get from a train of the Martin plant in Baltimore, except that the Soviet plant was boxed in by a high board fence. On this occasion I found the view spoiled not only by the fence and the customary activity of the car attendant. Making doubly sure that I would have no chance to observe this particular stretch of industrial scenery, the attendant rubbed the window down with a greasy rag.

Frosted window routine. On train trips in winter, nature often cooperates with the Soviet authorities by frosting over the windows of your car. When nature fails to do the trick, however, there is usually someone around to lend a hand, as I found once when boarding a train in Rostov. It was a clear, cold day and every window in the train was completely free of frost and ice, with one exception. The window of my compartment, in the middle of a car, had been sprayed on the outside until it was covered with a quarter-inch glaze of ice. When I attempted to chip some of the ice away, I was immediately stopped by a detail of militiamen. "You are violating Soviet regulations," they said. "You might scratch the glass."

Helpful hostess. When attaches board an airplane for a trip in the Soviet Union, word is passed along to the crew that foreigners are aboard. The hostess then makes it her business to distract the attention of the foreign traveler at moments when he might observe installations of military or industrial significance. A favorite technique when an airplane is taking off or approaching an airport is for the hostess to lean over your seat with an offering of reading material. Somehow she usually manages to hold a magazine in front of Your face so you can't see out the window. If you wave the solicitous girl away at such a moment you are of course being rude and unappreciative.

Smoke screen. When the Soviets are particularly anxious to conceal some installation from foreign eyes, they may use this standard military device. It takes a certain amount of preparation and good communications to time a smoke screen to go up just as an attaché drives down the highway or passes on the train, but they usually pull it off without a hitch. This technique, however, has the disadvantage of calling attention to the very object they wish to hide. On one train trip in central Russia an airfield we passed at a distance of three or four miles was ringed with upwards of 50 smoke generators belching away. "What's going on over there?" I asked one of the Russians who had been assigned to keep an eye on me during this journey. "It looks as though that airfield is on fire." I got a blank stare in return. "Airfield? Fire? I don't see anything," said the Russian, as though he could persuade me thus that there was nothing in sight but the natural Russian landscape.

Highway escort. When attaches undertake an automobile trip in the Soviet Union, they are accompanied by several cars of plain-clothes security agents. These keep shifting the order of their line-up along the highway to preserve the fiction that there is no surveillance of foreigners; but since auto traffic on most out-of-town roads in the Soviet Union is very light, the pretense is bound to wear thin as the same "protective" cavalcade of Pobedas and Zims rolls along behind you hour after hour. When you stop by the roadside to stretch your legs the cavalcade pulls up a hundred yards or so away. For some reason, the security personnel always make a minute inspection of your stopping place after you have moved on. Perhaps they imagine that attaches may plant nefarious devices or hide messages to conspirators along the highways.

Roadside reception committees. Should an auto trip take you through a region in which military or industrial installations are located, the motor escort is usually deemed inadequate to keep a proper curb on your curiosity, and the local militia and troops from the nearest military base are turned out en masse. They stand guard at every intersection to prevent you from turning off the designated route. Along some stretches of road they are posted at 10-yard intervals to keep you from making an "unauthorized" stop, thus often calling attention, like the smoke screen, to the very installation you are supposed not to observe. Running the gauntlet of such reception committees is generally bothersome, however, especially when they bar access to the only decent roads in the vicinity and require you to detour along rutted back country wagon trails to get to your destination. Frequently the only satisfaction an

attaché gets from such a trip is the knowledge that the Soviets have tied up an inordinate amount of manpower to control his itinerary.

Phoney militiaman routine. Around cities it is not always feasible to have a guard posted at every corner when attaches happen to be in town, and a portable militiaman must be improvised. The militia are the uniformed police, whom you are legally required to obey when they flag your car down and tell you to turn around. Not so the security agent in plain clothes unless he shows his credentials, a revelation which security operatives are loath to make. To get around this difficulty, each auto-load of security men has in its kit a militia uniform which one of the operatives may put on as occasion demands. The car speeds ahead, the phoney militiaman jumps out still buttoning up his jacket, and you are hailed to a stop. This technique more or less effectively confines attaché sightseeing in the environs of a Soviet city to churches, cemeteries, and other approved cultural attractions.

Frequent interceptions on a drive about a large city may produce the curious result that you keep encountering the same phoney militiaman at widely separated points. Once in Leningrad an agent with a torn shoulder strap on his militiaman's uniform flagged us down several times in the same afternoon. As the crowd of onlookers would gather around we would ask him, each time a bit more caustically: "So it's you again. Haven't you got that strap fixed yet? Bozhe moi! You sure are setting a sloppy example for all the genuine militiamen in Leningrad!" His wrathful frustration was a pleasure to behold, for no one wants less than a security agent to become the butt of attention in front of a crowd of fellow-citizens: his next assignment might involve checking up on one of those same citizens.

"Road under Repair" routine. The pretense that a bridge is out or that a particular stretch of road is under repair is often used to keep motoring attaches from reaching a destination the authorities do not want to declare formally out of bounds. On one occasion, when some travelers were told by local Soviet officials that they could not proceed to the town of Pskov because a bridge en route "had been washed out in; a storm," they insisted on going ahead anyway. They had not, got very far along the road when a truck full of soldiers sped past. A few minutes later they came to a small wooden bridge, in time to see the soldiers beginning to take it apart plank by plank.

Kerosene in the crankcase. When other devices fail to discourage attaches

from an undesirable motoring itinerary,; there is always the alternative of a little midnight attention to their automobile. Cars which had passed a searching inspection before the start of a trip sometimes used to develop] peculiar ailments after having been parked overnight in the courtyard of a Soviet hotel. I had a brand-new automobile, mileage still under 3,000, break down with burned-out engine bearings on a trip in southern Russia. Kerosene in the crankcase-hardly the work of a mere prankster-turned out to be the cause.

Indignant citizen act. The attitude of ordinary Soviet citizens toward foreigners is generally a combination of curiosity and friendliness. Deliberately hostile behavior is quite out of character, for ordinary citizens are aware that they can get into trouble by unsanctioned demonstrations of ill will. It is an obvious artifice, therefore, when planted agitators attempt to incite a crowd of Soviet citizens against attaché travelers. I recall a typical instance wherein two attaches were set upon while visiting the historic Kremlin of the city of Kazan.

The Kremlin, sitting on high ground, affords a distant view of the city's industrial suburbs. Apparently the Soviet authorities thought it best to deny this view to foreign attaches, but since the Kremlin was open to the public they had no plausible excuse for barring admittance. Professional agitators were therefore called into action to create a scene. They collected a crowd, ranted at the travelers, and threatened to shoot them if they did not leave the premises at once. When the agitators were asked to show their credentials, they claimed to be "indignant citizens" who did not have to identify themselves. This tactic usually proves effective, for attaches cannot afford to become involved in altercations with Soviet citizens, however strong the provocation, lest they be officially accused of violating Soviet order. As on many similar occasions, the attaches in this case were harried off the streets and obliged to take refuge in their hotel room until time to catch the next train out of town.

The foregoing provides a sample of the harassments and petty subterfuges by which Soviet authorities prevent military attaches traveling in nominally open areas from making the most commonplace observations, observations of a kind which Soviet representatives in Western countries are perfectly free to make without hindrance. It seems reasonable to expect that nuclear inspectors, if they are admitted, will be faced with the frustration of these and similar obstructive contrivances.

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