

Soviet Snapshots

Trouble Brewing in the USSR?

By H.S.

The following are notes taken during a recent trip to the USSR by a sympathiser of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement from West Germany. The visitor was able to use the current situation in the USSR to encounter people there and carry out some political discussion with them. However, in a letter accompanying her notes, our visitor cautions readers that "language and other restrictions limited the scope of my discussions and also made it more difficult to meet with proletarians; generally I spoke with educated youth who knew English or German." Translated by AWTW.

Moscow

A city of eight million people, the nerve centre of the Soviet Union. To get to the centre, I passed through seemingly endless rows of anonymous multi-storied residential buildings, then rode along Moscow's famed subway complex and emerged into daylight to witness a cortege of black limousines racing from the Kremlin, for a moment holding at bay the throngs of Soviet citizens bustling around the city centre. Moscow exudes the cold, raw power of the capital of an empire.

I make for the Old Arbat. The Russians still call it the Jewish quarter, where artisans had their shops and later merchants plied their wares in pre-revolutionary times. In the last year or two it has been converted into a broad, modern pedestrian walkway, lined with modern boutiques. Dozens of artists are doing portraits or painting famous historic sites for tourists; a few surrealists imitate Salvador Dali. One satirist causes a stir: he has drawn a fat, grotesque Brezhnev with his chin dragging along the ground because the numerous medals on his chest weigh him down.

Many young couples stroll, and a lot of single men are wandering about. Not a few of them are in uniform. The Soviet military is highly visible — I wonder whether the image of a man in a uniform is still so untarnished by Afghanistan, but later I learn that wearing a uniform on leave is mandatory.

I pass some poets, who have pasted their writings up on the walls, and a couple of singers, before stopping to listen to one who has gathered a crowd, a large man with shoulder-length blond hair. His singing is closer to declaiming poetry with guitar accompaniment, a characteristically Russian style. He grins sardonically. A youth on the edge of the crowd explains that the singer is asking, what will happen to the motherland if they open the doors and everyone leaves for the West? He finishes; only a few people laugh. The singer seems to be apologetic; he says the song is not anti-Soviet, that he is simply criticising the "defects of the system." This is a formula which recurs frequently. It was rarely clear whether people used it because they believed it, because they thought their listeners believed it or because it was Gorbachev's phrase and they tried to wield it like a shield to protect their own deeper-going criticism.

After dinner, I head home alone back through the Old Arbat. The night is beautiful and clear; the streets are still crowded. A woman alone at night suffers occasional harassment, especially from drunks, but Soviet streets do not witness the level of violence against women that haunts them in West Germany — though everyone says it is on the rise. The blond-haired satirist now has an even larger audience. I stroll on and come upon a dozen youth gathered around joking and every once in a while breaking into a song. I pick up on the word "Afghanistan" and approach the

group. The only one who knows English is a man of African origin, in his younger twenties, with a goatee and a hint of a Rasta haircut, named Andrei. I am pleasantly surprised because there is an almost unnerving absence of non-white people on Moscow's streets.

I ask what they sing about. Andrei asks where I'm from. West Germany, I reply. "We sing different kinds of songs," he says, "but that one was political, against *both East and West*." He awaits my response, looking almost defiant. "I can't disagree with that," I laugh. We discuss what he means by his statement; he says that, for instance, the song they just finished was against the war in Afghanistan. He repeats some of the lines of the song: "Who cares about her son who died? Nobody, only her. Tell me, do you even know why he died?" The government doesn't care, he goes on, it sent these blokes to die over there and then just forgot them. Here, listen to this other song.

Five or six of them gather around: a few young Russian women, 18-20 years old, dressed like folksingers, lead off; a fervent-looking chubby man, black-haired and bearded with glasses, a young "Raskolnikov," plays guitar; and the African man joins in. The song is against "what the Soviet government is doing in southern Africa and in Angola," Andrei explains.

They have formally constituted themselves as a singing political association; the core of the group has been together for a year or two, they — mainly "Raskolnikov" — write their own songs and sing them on the streets. They are part of the "three no's" movement which had a large meeting not long before in the capital: no to violence, no to racial and national chauvinism, and no to the idea that any single group has a monopoly on truth. They have had conflicts with the militia, but usually only when they try to sing after 11 pm at night, when it's forbidden to make noise. I ask what kind of reaction they get from passers-by. "Raskolnikov" replies: - There is the occasional fool who tries to provoke us. Many people simply don't understand why we do

this. But there are also people who like what we sing.

A few youth continue to sing while five or six of us settle into a discussion, which initially centres on the war in Afghanistan. They are against the policy of both the Soviet and U.S. blocs there and around the world, they say — but it soon becomes apparent that this is more complex. One person argues that neither West nor East is essentially flawed but both need to have their defaults pointed out and corrected by their people. Afghanistan was a "mistake" of the Soviets "just like Vietnam" was a mistake of the U.S. Both blocs want to get stronger and bigger and run everything.

"Raskolnikov" interjects that the foreign policy of both is frequently bad, but internally the Soviet system is worse. Stalin, he says, has a lot of responsibility for this. He then pulls out his "internal passport." This, he explains, is a system which the Soviet government uses to help regulate labour and maintain domestic control. It is marked on the internal passport where you have the right to work; to change this requires permission from the militia, which, depending on your personal history and where you want to move, may or may not be granted.

I respond that there are problems in the USSR which we do not have, but that there are also problems we face in the West which they don't have, at least in the same way — for instance, mass unemployment. What would they say to someone in the West who focused on that and argued, look, the USSR doesn't have millions of people without work, therefore it's better? Both countries are equally bad. "Raskolnikov" insists:

— Yes, both have problems, but still ours won't even allow its own people to travel and see the world. Look, you're here, you can come see us and how we live, but we can't come see you. We can't even know for ourselves.

He gets a chorus of support.

I persist too:

— Well, I'd like you to come see West Germany, so you would know for yourselves that it's not really any better. But what if Gorbachev

lets you go abroad? Will that be real freedom? How many of you will be able to afford it? Most people in West Germany can't. And for those who can, sure, you will be able to wander the world, but you will find that every country is simply a big prison with a different language. You will be free to travel and see all kinds of different prisons: the prison called America, the one called England or Germany as well as, when you come back home, the one called... Well, I'll let you describe your own country.

Most everyone laughs. Raskolnikov is not convinced, and starts to continue, but a couple of militiamen appear and tell them it's 11 o'clock, time to disperse. People head to the subway: an older fellow, a researcher, accompanies me part-way. I ask him what he thinks the future will bring. He's pessimistic: — All this you've seen tonight couldn't have happened two years ago. We couldn't have talked like that, openly, and certainly not with you. But I don't think it will go on. There is a logic to our system: every new leader opens up for a while to bring in his own policies and people, then shuts things down once he's consolidated his rule.

The next day, again on the Old Arbat, I come upon a display board about the need for more democracy in the USSR and inviting people to discuss the subject. Twenty or thirty people are already gathered in animated discussion; I find a man to help me, and soon he and I are talking and the whole group begins to centre around us. The group is made up mainly of men in their 30s and 40s, who look like they're from a variety of backgrounds; it is even joined by a passing army officer. My translator friend tells me that the organisers are from the Democratic Union (DU), a well known group which actively promotes democratic reform in the USSR.

The two DU people include a woman of about 40, stout, long brown hair, dressed in a peasant outfit, and a younger man who might have been an engineer or accountant. Both had the air of semi-professional agitators, speaking loudly and confidently and helping

each other with difficult opponents, though most people there agreed with their general thrust. They hit at the gap between the theory and practice of the Soviet legal system as well as the need for fundamental changes in the constitution. It appeared that they had a worked out strategy of mobilising from below to push the Soviet government towards more parliamentary democracy; but they also virulently attacked Gorbachev, even while paying him lip service, and it occurred to me that at least some among them might have an agenda for more dramatic change, including in alliance with powerful Western forces.

In any case, they soon began to point out how wonderful it was that we in West Germany now had the right to vote for different parties in elections, and waited expectantly for me to confirm this evident truth. I said that I didn't vote because the elections just served to build confidence in our government, and that it didn't matter who won, the people lost. Smiles turned quickly to frowns, and they declared to all present that I was undoubtedly a member of the Communist Party of West Germany, whose numerical strength seems to be vastly overestimated there, perhaps because of confusion with the much larger French and Italian parties. I replied no, that the West German CP *always* votes in elections and besides, from my trip so far I saw no reason to join a party whose goal was to make West Germany resemble the USSR. They then argued that in order for there to be real democracy there had to be freedom to criticise the CPSU and how could there be real freedom to do this unless people can organise together to do it, ie, in a multiparty system with free elections. I pointed to the classic Western democracies, Britain and America, and how both had multiparty elections and at the same time had given the world countless colonial wars, including Vietnam, were pillars of apartheid, and were marked by racism, unemployment and violence. Was this the freedom they wanted? Was it better — or essentially the same?

After another exchange on the

freedom to travel, I said I must go; most people express disappointment — but not the two DU people, who quickly and politely wish me goodbye.

In the late afternoon I go with an American I'd met to look for the hostels for foreign students studying in Moscow. While asking directions, we stumble on an older man, drunk, probably from the Caucasus, who asks where we're from. Upon learning I'm German, he remarks, now then, Hitler, there's a man who knew how to deal with the Russians! — and waits for me to agree with him. We leave. After an hour or so of fruitless searching, we ask an African man waiting for a bus. He says that you must show a student card to get in, and so we wind up in a discussion with him instead. He's from Nigeria and is studying chemical engineering in Samarkand. He does not really want to stay in the USSR, he says, because he misses his country and wants to help it, but he is married to a Russian woman, so his future is not too clear.

I ask him about what life is like for an African in the USSR. He says that he doesn't know Germany, but he has a relative in Philadelphia he once spent a summer with and in some ways it's different in the USSR, because the Russians don't know African people and don't have a long history and tradition of oppressing them like America does. But in many ways it's similar: quite a few Russians are racist, he says, and their racism towards Asians, which is very strong and has deep roots, carries over against Africans.

Being married to a Russian woman draws frequent harassment — I ask him "like what?" but the question makes him uncomfortable and he declines to give any details. This is one reason he prefers making his home in one of the Asian republics instead of in Russia itself. Some of the Russians think that their government spends too much money in Africa when they should spend it to make life better at home for "their own people," so he hears about that "more than I want to think about."

We get off onto Fela Kuti, the progressive nationalist Nigerian musician who was imprisoned a couple

of years ago, and what we think of his politics, and my American friend jumps in with her own favorite, so we're soon off onto the merits of Fela, King Sunny Adé and Juju music.

Our Nigerian friend has to go to dinner with his wife's family, so we part, leaving all three of us feeling better about the planet's prospects knowing that a German, an American and a Nigerian can spend an hour or so on Lenin Prospect in Moscow and share some views about Nigerian jazz as well as who are the real "International Thief Thiefs."

Baku, Soviet Azerbaidzhan

The city is nestled on the west bank of the Caspian Sea. The fifth largest city in the USSR, it is an industrial centre of over a million people, for years the heart of the Soviet oil industry.

I meet a couple of Azeris at a downtown bookstore: Samed, in his mid-20s, who is a student at the art institute, and his friend Hamid, who is an electrical engineer. I pose a few general questions about Azerbaidzhan, which elicit vague general replies, then ask about Nagorno-Karabakh. They drop their voices to discuss this, even though we appear to be surrounded only by other Azerbaidzhanis. They agree that there have been some bad things happening to the Armenians, but they argue that some bad things have also been done to the Azerbaidzhani people. They ask what the West German press says about all this.

I say that I am at least aware that the Armenians are a majority in Nagorno-Karabakh and it seems should have some say about their fate.

An older man standing nearby breaks in on us and asks them what we're saying. They explain, a bit embarrassed, that he told them to inform me that there are not so many Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, and that it's Azerbaidzhani land.

— But, they say, it's true the Armenians are a majority today, and this is one cause of the problems. But you have to ask what the Armeni-

ans are up to and why. The Armenians have a lot of ties to their Western diaspora and are being stirred up over Nagorno-Karabakh by the West. The Armenian CPSU leadership are ambitious and have fomented the movement to take over Nagorno-Karabakh to expand their own power too, they say — seemingly contradicting their previous assertion that the West was behind events.

— Nagorno-Karabakh has been mainly Azerbaidzhani for hundreds of years, and it's only since the middle or end of the 19th century that the Armenians have been so numerous, and even so the large majority they have today is very recent. The Armenians might suffer some discrimination there, but the Azerbaidzhanis in Armenia also have their problems.

They tell me about the series of counter-demonstrations against the Armenians that have been going on in Baku, called by what seems to be an informal committee which has sprung up. Some demonstrations get official permission — the leadership of these comprises CPSU cadres as well as non-CPSU people. They draw 5- 10,000. Those without official permission, which seem to be more vehemently anti-Armenian, but which my friends know little about, are routinely dispersed by the militia and draw only a few hundred. I ask:

— What do you think are the root causes of the conflicts between Armenian and Azeri? After all, it's 70 years after the revolution, why should such problems still be occurring now?

They look at each other, pause and then offer some vague generalities about history being long and complicated. They ask my opinion. Time is running short, for they have told me they must leave shortly. I decide to speak more bluntly:

— I do not know everything about the situation there, although I think the Armenians have some just grievances. I think though that to really understand this problem one must look at the main problem between the different nationalities in the USSR, and that's the problem of the Russian domination of the other nationalities.

Their faces light up and they smother a laugh; we agree to meet the next day. Back in West Germany, I recount this story to a friend, who sums up succinctly: it's natural, they judged you by your stand on their main enemy.

The next day they begin to tell me some of the history of Azerbaidzhan. They tell me how Azerbaidzhan was divided into two parts by a Tsarist invasion and other developments in pre-revolutionary history which I know little about; but when they begin to talk of current developments — the fall of the Shah, events in Kurdistan, the situation of the Azeri language, etc. — they are surprised that I am already familiar with much of this. I tell them that I have friends in West Germany who are Iranians, including of Azeri origin, who were forced to flee from the Shah and/or Khomeini. This gives rise to another mini-revolution in our relationship, especially when in response to their eager questions about what these friends of mine think I reply that they oppose both blocs equally. This delights them, but it soon becomes apparent that they have their own version of what this means: that Azerbaidzhan has been divided in two by East and West, "like South and North Korea," and that both blocs are thus guilty of oppressing their people. They want to throw off both Russian and Western domination and unite the two halves of Azerbaidzhan into an independent country.

I talked to my Iranian-Azeri friends back in West Germany about what Hamid and Samed had said, and pieced together the following: Azerbaidzhan was indeed divided up when Tsarist troops invaded and forced Iran to sign a treaty at gunpoint. Later, the Azeri people played an important role in the October Revolution, including in the Red Army during the civil war, and after the revolution great strides were made towards overcoming national oppression and in building socialism. With the restoration of capitalism in the USSR, however, Azerbaidzhan was subjected to the system of national oppression set up by the new Tsars, so that now both sections of Azerbaidzhan are op-

pressed, one by Persians the other by the Russians. But, in the view of my friends in West Germany, even this common status didn't justify Hamid and Samed's goal of uniting Azerbaidzhan into one state.

For a number of years political refugees flowed into Soviet Azerbaidzhan, and probably as many as several thousand had come during the '50s, '60s and '70s. But recently the border had been shut tight by both the Islamic Republic and the Soviet government; Hamid thought this was because each side was afraid of the other at the same time as the Soviets wanted to try and gain influence with Khomeini by getting tough with his opponents. The USSR has even recently expelled a number of Iranian refugees living in Baku who dared criticise glasnost, even though they were generally pro-Soviet. They took me by the consulate of the Islamic Republic, which had a black flag draped out front in mourning for the victims of the Iran-Iraq war. Hamid and Samed said not many Soviet Azeri people were attracted by Khomeini; they thought instead that though the fall of the Shah had raised great hopes in Soviet Azerbaidzhan for something new in Iran, the results had turned out to be a "great tragedy" and disappointment for the Iranian people.

I ask about the Afghanistan war. Samed replies:

— Of course we are opposed to it. Look, we're a small nation here in the Soviet Union. Why would we want to go way over there and force our will on some other small people like the Afghani people?! The Soviet government compels people to do this, that's all.

They went on to say that the Afghani resistance was not so progressive, that they were mainly Islamic types like Khomeini, pro-Western, but still it was up to the Afghani people to decide what they are going to do internally. This was the right of all nations, without having any Great Power come in and dictate to them. I compared Hamid and Samed's support for the Afghani people with the Russian singers on the Old Arbat, whose anti-war sentiments spontaneously drifted into concern for the "poor

Russian soldiers" killed and then "forgotten" in the war — unfortunately, they "forgot" about the Afghan people; though Hamid and Samed's views were spontaneous too, they reflected a different set of contradictions.

None of the traditional arguments that had been run out for eight years carried any weight with them: no defense of the borders, no repulsion of Western aggression, nothing. Further, for them, "we" meant "we Azeris," not "we Soviets" — and "we Azeris" most definitely had no stake in the fighting.

This set me thinking, for indeed they *did* have a stake: in supporting the liberation war there against the Soviet Union. Certainly the fact that the Afghan resistance is marked so heavily by reactionary Islamic groups limits how much such an understanding would develop spontaneously. But what if a real people's war were launched, led by revolutionary forces who set up red base areas, carried out radical social changes and clearly exposed the Soviet Union's social-imperialist character? Wouldn't such a war have the potential to influence reactions here, in the soft belly of the Soviet empire, from passive opposition to genuine internationalist support, and wouldn't it be a tremendous aid to the emergence of a genuine proletarian revolutionary trend in the USSR itself? Mao remarked that the salvos of the October Revolution had spread Marxism-Leninism around the world — perhaps the salvos of a people's war against the Soviets in Afghanistan could bring genuine Marxism-Leninism back to the USSR!

As for what the future held for Afghanistan, Hamid and Samed thought that Gorbachev would go ahead and pull the bulk of the Soviet troops out. They couldn't say what would happen after that. As for why Afghanistan happened in the first place, they thought this was because the USSR, like the U.S. and all the big powers, wanted to increase its power and influence abroad, to get ever bigger.

— Why? Was this "socialist" ex-

pansion, as the West often said?

No, they replied. What they had in the USSR was not socialism. Something had gone wrong — but exactly what they didn't seem to know. They searched back in the Soviet experience. They weren't sure what they thought about Lenin overall, but one thing they were sure of was that he was no chauvinist. He was against the Russian people being above the other nationalities; in part they attributed this to Lenin's being only "partly Russian." Lenin was also opposed to wars like Afghanistan, they said, and would have been seriously disappointed at the way the Soviet Union turned out.

The idea of communism, Samed said, was a great one, and the October Revolution had held great promise. But what existed in the USSR was not what Marx and Lenin had fought for. Stalin bore some fault, they thought, and things had been on a steady decline for a long time. Maybe someday communism would be reached by human beings; but certainly not so long as some nations oppressed others.

We were all silent after this — I was churning with different emotions. I was far from sure just what communism meant to Hamid and Samed, but I was touched by a sense that somewhere in them the struggle and sacrifice of Lenin and the Soviet revolutionaries had not been completely lost; yet at the same time I understood more clearly the ambiguity of their feelings towards Lenin and Stalin: they liked their internationalism when it cut against the chauvinism of the Russian oppressor nation, but this same internationalism bothered them when it challenged their own nationalist sentiments.

We talked more about Stalin; every day there were major articles in the Soviet press blasting him as "a ruthless dictator." A veritable crusade has been launched criticising Stalin's role in the second world war, focusing at this point on "his great mistakes" of purging the military officer corps and not relying enough on technology; a book which is being touted as the authoritative work on Stalin and his

leadership in the war is being much publicised in advance of its appearance this winter (1988-1989). I was even to encounter the idea, and more than once, especially from Russian intellectuals, that Stalin was as bad as Hitler.

Samed and Hamid, however, thought this was going too far. Stalin's mistakes were big mistakes, Samed said, because Stalin was a great man and did things on a grand scale. He thought making Stalin into the same as Hitler meant that the Soviet effort in World War 2 was not worth anything, and that if nothing else he had proven able to mobilise the Soviet people and lead them to defeat fascism.

I agreed with them. I would have liked to have gone further and told them that I considered Stalin a great revolutionary leader, but I was anxious about being too open with my politics. Also, in the USSR the terms of the debate about Stalin are different and have dimensions which I didn't understand very well. I knew, for instance, that forces identified with Brezhnev had defended Stalin publically against criticism by Gorbachev supporters and I was sure their reasons had nothing to do with revolution. Besides, I thought it more important to get into Mao, without whom it would be difficult if not impossible to correctly appreciate Stalin.

I asked them what they knew about the big ideological struggle between China and the USSR back in the '60s. Neither knew much more than that Mao and the Chinese party had opposed Soviet domination of China.

I explained what I could about Mao's theory of capitalist restoration in the USSR, the existence of a new bourgeoisie and the need to continue the revolution. If I was expecting fires to light up in their eyes, it didn't happen.

Tbilisi, Soviet Georgia

Georgia is a mountainous region located just east of the Black Sea and north of Armenia. The coastline itself resembles Greece, with a warm climate and vineyard-draped mountains plunging into the sea. The Georgians are an ancient peo-

ple; Georgia's "Golden Age" took place back in the 11th and 12th centuries. Stalin was born and raised here, and many people still uphold him, though for generally nationalist reasons. The local party is going to make their contribution to the current anti-Stalin crusade by putting up a monument to the "victims of Stalin," to be located in the park overlooking the city, which will retain its name: Stalin Park.

Early morning in the main square at the University of Tbilisi:

This is not exactly like the Free University of Berlin. There are no literature stands, no kiosks, no political tables, and even if foreigners were allowed inside the university they would find no leaflets announcing political events, avant-garde or progressive films, or anything of the sort. The atmosphere is tranquil, with friends hanging out but no obvious opening for talking to anyone.

Very few people speak Western languages here, but finally I meet a 17-year-old, fairly militant Georgian student, Sergei, with whom I set up a meeting at noon. While waiting for him, a young woman, Nana, seeing I'm reading in German, strikes up a conversation. Shortly thereafter my friend arrives and joins in. Within a few minutes, the group grows to 15 or 20 students huddled around in a whirlwind of debate.

The students talk more openly here. They immediately began to tell me about a conflict with the Soviet military. It seemed that the Soviet Red Army had set up a military target range near the site of a sixth century Georgian Orthodox church, one of the oldest ones in the area. According to the students, the soldiers had already been desecrating the church, writing slogans like "Ivan was here" on the walls in Russian.

All the students leap in to add their own accounts of crimes the Russians had committed against Georgian culture, and the discussion spins off onto this for a while. They speak in Georgian among themselves; though Russians make up 11% of the population in Georgia, and presumably at least that

much of the university population, none are in this group today.

Finally they get back to the story of the target range. Many Georgians think that the Army has gone too far, and there is talk of organising a demonstration. There had been one several years ago, against an amendment to the Constitution which would have omitted — consciously, they say — to enscribe Georgian as the official language of the Republic. But police repression back then had been heavy. Thousands of people had protested; according to one version, everything went peacefully, but Sergei — who uses his linguistic abilities to give an edited translation of people he disagrees with — says that there had been clashes with the police. The militia beat up a lot of people, including pregnant women, and arrested some, he doesn't know how many, but it was a "fight." A large section of the Tbilisi militia is not Georgian, he explains; they have 350 Armenians and Azeris in the force. This is deliberate government policy, to use the different nationality groupings to police one another, so that the militiamen have no local ties which restrain them from cracking down hard. I asked whether there were many women there. Very many, maybe as many as men.

Back in West Germany I read that the demonstration my friends had talked about had in fact taken place. Between 5,000 and 10,000 people had marched down Rustaveli Prospect, the main street in Tbilisi, to the headquarters of the party. The head of the CPSU in Georgia had, according to the West German press, conveyed the protestors' demands to Moscow and assured them that Gorbachev personally was reviewing the situation.

The students in Tbilisi had given me their opinion of this local party chief. Yusef, one of the more outspokenly nationalist students, said that although he might not be such a bad individual, the local party head was interested above all in keeping his own position and so would try to play off the local people against the bureaucracy in Moscow. Yusef concluded that they couldn't trust this man.

This battle around the target range has been going on for several years, and middle-ranking Georgian officials have played an important part in it. A question that had already arisen in Baku sprang to mind again: just what are the bourgeoisie in these republics — what is their relation to the Soviet imperialist bourgeoisie? This demanded analysis of the relationship of these republics to the USSR overall — it was a question that was already sharply posing itself before all these struggles, but not clearly enough to those whom I was meeting, at least not from a revolutionary viewpoint.

While going through the events surrounding the target range, we touch on the Georgian Orthodox Church and religion. I remark that it seems like many things are springing up in the wake of *glasnost*, including the churches, several of which I had seen open even very late at night, when almost everything else is closed up tight. In fact, church attendance in the USSR is almost as great as in many countries in the West. The revisionist ideology of this society which calls itself socialist and routinely oppresses millions obviously leaves people searching elsewhere for real meaning to their lives and, as in any other class society, spontaneously they first look to other forms of oppressive ideology for salvation.

Several students assert that it's important to defend the Church against the central government. I ask whether they believe in god. Almost all do; they immediately ask me about myself; I tell them that my background was religious but I no longer believe. This raises some eyebrows. Then I ask them how many go to church? They look around inquisitively at each other, then laugh — no one, it turns out, ever goes. Defending the Georgian Church is a sort of "cultural matter," one of them loosely explains.

Sharp debate ensues about why such things as the struggle around the target range happened. One student ventures that it is just because of ignorance, that the Russians don't care about all the different smaller national minorities and so such things are bound to happen. Yusef retorts that this is true, some

Russians are ignorant, and step on other peoples without realising what they are doing. This is one thing. But other Russians suppress the smaller nationalities consciously, knowing full well what they are doing, and this is another thing altogether. He adds that, anyway, the Russian people are mediocre as a people and have proved themselves, in his words, to have "no historically redeeming value." Nana, the young woman whom I'd begun talking to, obviously found Yusef's anti-Russian sentiments provocative — she joined the general laughter at Yusef's verdict on the Russians, but then countered that he went too far, that at least the Russian people had tried to do something when they made the revolution. Anyway, she added, the Russians are "a young people" historically speaking (!) and "perhaps they could learn to change."

The theme of whether the Russian people had any "redeeming value" seemed agreeable to all the students as a vehicle for lots of barbs and laughter at the Russians' expense. Unfortunately, I got too carried away with their enthusiasm and laughter and failed to pose a very fundamental question: are *all* Russians their enemy? Are there not millions of Russian proletarians and others too who are oppressed and held down by the way things are and who can be mobilised to fight *all* oppression, including that of the minority nationalities?

I try to turn the discussion to what they want to do about the problems they see.

— We are all against communism, declares one.

— No, Yusef intervenes, the point isn't that we're against communism in general, we're against the kind of communism that we have here. We're against the kind of communism that says that we all like the Soviet Union, that all the peoples in the USSR enjoy equal rights, that everything here is getting better and better — we're against *this* communism.

— Look around you, wouldn't you be against this?, someone asks me.

— Are you for capitalism?, I respond.

— Well, capitalism doesn't seem to

have such a good way of dealing with small countries either, does it? Look what the U.S. is doing to Nicaragua.

Most agree that both blocs face big problems.

— We want national independence. We want Georgia for the Georgian people, not to be run by anyone else, East or West, Sergei says.

— Well, I'm against East and West too, but do you really judge everything simply on whether it's good for Georgia?

It seems you're against nationalism, Sergei responds. People need national feeling. Don't you have national feeling for Germany?

— No. And then I try to explain how I feel about the difference between nationalism in imperialist countries and oppressed countries. If I were in Turkey, I say, where West German business tries to run everything, and I were to go around trying to promote national feeling for Germany, is this the same thing as a Turk who comes to West Germany and, in the face of the dominant German culture, backed by its vast financial power, tries to preserve his language and heritage and defend his rights? Not only do I not have national feeling for Germany, I say, but I am against it. Look what it led to in the last war. Isn't that enough already? Then I say that I would oppose, not support, any war by West Germany, even if West Germany itself were invaded.

They all agree that German nationalism has caused big problems.

— But what about a country like Ireland? Do you think the Irish people should defend themselves against the British?

— Yes, but that's more like Turkey than like West Germany.

— Well, if Georgia were attacked I would defend it, says Yusef. But if the Soviet Union were attacked.... He hesitates, thinking. Well, I don't know what I would do. (This time Yusef's remarks don't draw the approving laughter they usually do — things have grown more serious.) But, and he grins broadly again, if I were in Germany and you attacked Georgia, then I would do everything I could to wreck your war effort. (Now everyone laughs.)

Now it's me who hesitates — I had decided before beginning the trip that I would not go around talking about my ideas about Mao and the Cultural Revolution, so as to avoid problems with the Soviet authorities. Though I'd already broken with that decision in Baku, with Samed and Hamid, it seemed a different matter to go into this in front of 15-20 students like this. I decided to go ahead, and asked what they knew about Mao.

— Well, Mao was for China's independence, one student ventured. Not one of them, it turned out, had ever read anything by Mao.

I start to explain about his ideas about capitalist restoration but haven't gotten very far when Nana interrupts and says that behind all these ideas is really just Mao's determination to keep China free of any possible domination by the USSR, and that was fine for China, but in Georgia they didn't need a Chinese they needed a Georgian.

One of the students then leapt in with a tirade against the other peoples in Georgia:

— The Armenians, for instance, sure it's good they're protesting about Nagorno-Karabakh, but they only care about the Armenian Republic. They have their own homeland, their own republic, so they don't care about what happens here. Do you think the Armenians in Tbilisi care about the Soviet target range? Of course not. The Russians are the same. Perhaps they bring more into Georgia, because their people have influence in the government. The Jews are the only ones who care about what happens here, and that's because they don't have their own homeland. So they contribute to Georgia, they care about our struggle here.

This again launches a big debate, which loses me completely.

I reflect that, for all the berating of Stalin that is rampant among Soviet intellectuals today even in places like Georgia and Azerbaidzhan, to make some real advances they needed to learn from his approach to the national question. Stalin held that, insofar as nationalism among the Georgian, Azeri and other such oppressed national-

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USSR

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ities was concerned, as long as it was directed against Great Russian chauvinism, it was fine, but the problem was that sometimes it didn't stop there and this nationalism would turn into chauvinism of the Georgians, Azeris and so forth against each other.

After an ebb in their debate, I ask them whether, with only 3-4 million Georgians, they think it would be possible to set up a viable independent government?

— Vietnam is a small country, but they defeated a very big power, Yusef quickly retorts.

Yusef points to the swiftly growing nationalist movement in the Baltic Republics. He says that the Georgians want to be independent, but that they are not alone, that all the other minority peoples in the USSR feel the same.

— Well, it seems you're prepared to go quite a ways.

— Yes, we are.

I reflect for a moment on our discussion and grow nervous. Holding a discussion at the main entrance to the University of Tbilisi with a dozen students urging me to understand the need for the Georgian and other minority peoples to break away from the Soviet government was not my preconceived notion of how political discussion was carried out in the USSR, even under glasnost. Here at least things had undeniably taken a turn that would have given Mr Gorbachev nightmares. Glasnost was intended to mobilise what the revisionists call the "human factor" in the USSR, not least of all the intellectuals. But Gorbachev's point was to broaden the regime's base and mobilise behind the broad goal of making the USSR stronger and more efficient, and here were the cream of Georgia's educated youth, who should be the next generation of scientists, party cadre, teachers, etc., castigating Russian chauvinism and openly debating whether it was possible to break away from the USSR.

I asked whether it might be dangerous to have a discussion like this.

A unanimous "no." A couple of years ago it would have been, Yusef

goes on. But now we have — he paused for effect, grinning ironically — glasnost! Back then a demonstration would be met with bullets or at least billyclubs, he said. He then recounts how there were large demonstrations in Georgia in 1956, which his father took part in, where dozens of people were killed.

— But, I ask, aren't there people in the party or the Komsomol who might get you into trouble for such talk?

This brought a round of laughter. "We *are* the Komsomol," they rejoined. Every one of the dozen or so students intent on liberating Georgia was, it turned out, a member of the CPSU youth group. And would they go on to become party members? Some would, some wouldn't. This was seen overwhelmingly as a career decision; if someone needed to join the party to get ahead in his own job, then he or she would — and, it was made clear, their friends would understand and not particularly hold this against them. Such was the pitiful fate of the former party of Lenin.

I ask whether they think our discussion is a good example of what Mr Gorbachev had in mind in launching "glasnost." This draws a big laugh.

As the group breaks up I get a chance to talk with a couple of them more individually, though Sergei's presence as translator perhaps shies anyone away from the idea of inviting me home. Nana says that she thought Lenin had really been a genius, that he had some magnificent ideas, but that somewhere along the way these had been lost.

Nana, Yusef, Sergei and I get in an exchange on what the Georgians call the "cult of women," which refers to the way women in Georgia are looked at. Nana tackled Yusef head-on for his belief that this too was one of Georgia's "national traditions" that shouldn't be tampered with. Sergei even went so far as to argue that the "cult of women" included the idea that Georgian women should only marry Georgian men, and that the women should be virgins until married but Georgian men need not be so long as they went out with non-Georgian women. Nana labelled

this outright hypocrisy — then asked my opinion. I agreed, and added that if Georgian men insisted on trying to keep the women under their domination then not only would that make it harder to mobilise all their people, especially the masses of women, but also their movement would be infected from the beginning with ideas of inequality. Yusef yielded slightly, saying that he "personally" would never demand unequal rights like that from a woman, but after all it was a national tradition, and there were the Russians stomping on all their traditions.... Nana asks me later whether most German women thought as I do. I answered that many do, perhaps even more and more.

— I bet that's because a lot of German men think just like the men here, she said; Sergei was obviously displeased, but Nana and I had a good laugh.

Piatigorsk, Soviet Georgia

This is a resort town in the Caucasus Mountains. It has the prosperity typical of a tourist town, and today is distinguished by the fact that it is one of the closest resorts to Stavropol, the home town of Mikhail Gorbachev.

I come upon a group of vacationing Azerbaidzhani students and have no trouble engaging them in a discussion. We quickly get onto the subject of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. They are all 100% certain that the Armenians are in the wrong. But, they reassure me, there is nothing to worry about, because Gorbachev is dealing correctly with them.

On the Afghanistan war, they try to distinguish the Soviet position from that of the U.S. in Vietnam, arguing that Vietnam was an unjust war because the U.S. invaded half-way around the world, while Afghanistan was different and justifiable because it is right on the Soviet border.

After a fruitless back-and-forth on this, I ask them about the differences between the West and the USSR; the main speaker among them replies that there is probably more freedom in the West, in fact,

there is "too much freedom." By this, he means that people can just do "whatever they want," that they can become prostitutes or junkies or simply go crazy, and that such things wouldn't be allowed to happen in the USSR. I begin to argue, but then wonder whether it's worth the effort and instead ask what they are studying. Except for one journalism student, they are all studying law. Just like Mikhail Gorbachev. I decide that I've profited enough from my discussion with these future pillars of Soviet society. The good-byes are polite, but not overly friendly.

Leningrad

Walking through Leningrad, you feel like you could turn a corner and bump into an episode out of *Ten Days That Shook the World* — the famous names of the Revolution resound everywhere: the Winter Palace, Smolny Institute, the cruiser Aurora which opened fire in support of the initial Bolshevik assaults, the Peter and Paul Fortress where so many revolutionaries fell to the Tsar's torturers. The morning is consumed finding out that Leningrad University is not as convenient a place to meet people as were the universities in Tbilisi and Baku. Finally, I encounter — or rather, am hustled by — a black marketeer named Vassily. Preconceptions about young guys who walk up to you and, glancing furtively from side to side, whisper, "Change money?" are turned topsy turvy as he informs me that he is a student in the medical school. We talk for an hour or so. He looks like a Russian movie star, clean-cut, big smile, hip, handsome, and very sure of himself; he speaks excellent German, is up on the Western rock scene, knows about the recent Amnesty International tour for Human Rights, likes punk rock, Nina Hagen, Pink Floyd, and Bruce Springsteen and wants to exchange any rock tapes I have for Russian souvenirs.

I decline, but am curious: this medical student should be a pillar of respectable Soviet society — yet here he is risking jail by working the black market. I ask him why he

does this and what he intends to do with his earnings. He says that he doesn't have a father and his mother works in a factory, so they don't have much money; he will be obliged to work as a doctor for the government, at fairly low wages, despite Gorbachev's recent salary hike for many professionals, unless he can put together enough money on the black market to set up his own private practice. "Perestroika," he offers by way of explanation.

His business is going well, and Vassily should be able to accomplish his goal within a year or two of finishing school. He is one of the few people I meet in the USSR who is sure he would like to move to the West. He knows that doctors make a lot more there. I try to argue with him, pointing out problems in the West: unemployment, violence, racism against immigrants, sharp polarisation between rich and poor, and besides, I ask, why does he think so many of the youth in the West commit suicide or take drugs? — Yes, he interjects, that's just why I'm worried — if I stay here, I'll get onto hard drugs, like my friends. — A lot of your friends do drugs? — Most of them. There's more drugs around since Afghanistan. — Do they ever have problems with the militia? — Sometimes, but sometimes you can pay them off.

We get back into the argument about his desire to go to the West. I try to explain that even if the West is materially richer, that this wealth comes from its greater empire, especially in the Third World, but this doesn't exactly inspire Vassily. I am disappointed, but hardly surprised. For, when all is said and done, if you want to be bourgeois, it's true that, however luxurious the lifestyle of the social-imperialists and their hangers-on, the bourgeois lifestyle is more luxurious and more accessible in the West than in the East, exactly because of the West's world position.

I ask what Vassily thinks about the recent developments in Soviet foreign policy.

— Yes, these are good, we have a greater chance to go to the West than before.

At last, I say to myself, I've met a genuine Russian young burgher.

— What about Afghanistan? Did you have to serve in the military?

— Not yet.

— Will you have to?

— Well, this is complicated. Even under Brezhnev you could pay some money and get out of military service. It's the same now.

— How much?

— 2000, at most 3000 roubles.

I had heard this same story in Tbilisi, only the price is higher in Leningrad.

— Do you know men who've been to Afghanistan?

— Sure, several guys from my high school class had to go. They came back with photos, they did awful things there. They told me that the Army shot children, old people... they destroyed whole towns... you know, just wiped them out. A lot of Afghani people died, or fled and became refugees. Many Russians died too. Guys come back without hands, without legs. But it's in their heads too. My friends are not normal anymore. They don't fit in anywhere.

I thought of the broadcast of "Vremya," the Soviet evening news, which I had watched the night before with a Russian friend; it showed rocket attacks on the city of Kabul, focusing on the Afghan women and children who were victims and the Soviet doctors who came to their aid. *Sputnik*, a Soviet popular magazine translated and distributed in the West, even wrote that, "There is one point on which everyone is unanimous, soldiers of the people's army as well as peasants, representatives of the opposition, local mullahs, those who form public opinion as well as the men of the bazaar: the Soviets never dishonored themselves as soldiers. Yes, they always conducted themselves as true soldiers with the enemy. They did everything possible to avoid damaging the fields and irrigation works — not with their heavy equipment, nor their wheels, nor even their artillery. Conscious of the risk they were taking, they would even drive over mined roads so as not to damage the fields.... If they had the time, they repaired any damage done to roads, buildings

and canals by the war."

Just like in the West during Vietnam, the official media continues to cover the government's bloody crimes with its lies and distortions long after millions know the truth about the war. Vassily came by his cynicism "honestly."

He tells me what he knows about the recent events in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Why does he think this is happening?

— Basically all these different peoples, Armenian, Azerbaidzhani, and all the rest of them, they really don't want to stay part of the Soviet Union. This has never happened before like this. But it can't really continue. Our system is too clever, they have the Soviet army, which is huge, and so.... His voice trails off.

— Besides, the Armenians just want more for themselves anyhow. They're just like everyone else. Do you really think this is so different? Then he laughs,

— You know, if Lenin were alive today, he'd... (and then he makes a face expressing astonishment and horror) at all this.

— It would seem to me that there must be people who want to carry on what Lenin set out to do, who take all the things Lenin said seriously?

— Of course. But they are very very depressed people. You should see them. What do you think it's like to try to change such a society?

He tells me about the underground rock scene in Leningrad. He thinks there's a lot of concerts, but "none this week." He has some tapes of groups he thinks I might find interesting, but I'm leaving before he can round them up. He recommends two groups, "Alisa" from Leningrad and "D.D.T." from the Urals, whom he compares to the Clash or the Sex Pistols (two radical British punk groups). I ask him why he likes punk.

— Because they say and express that society is all messed up, that everyone is out for themselves in this place.

I observe that he seems to have adapted, and he replies, what else can I do?

I begin to get a feeling that I have had numerous times before on the

trip when dealing with phenomena from the West that have been imported into the East bloc: they look the same, but something gets displaced, like an object sent into outer space on a space ship that still looks like it always does but suddenly begins to float around, so that it's hard to get hold of it. What was the impact of punk music here? Astonishingly broad ranges of youth were familiar with it, and most people I talked to were inspired by its rebelliousness. But for many the very existence of such rebellious music coming from the West reinforced the idea that Western democracy was better, since it allowed the punks to rebel, even though the punk music itself attacked the West.

Before parting, Vassily tells me that the main hangout for artists, punks, students, and so forth in Leningrad is a place on Nevsky Prospect called the Saigon Café. I perk up at the name: Soviet cafes are so uniform that no one bothers with names, much less names like that one.

I set out along Nevsky Prospect and walk a mile or so: no Saigon Café. I retrace my steps; the Saigon Café turns out to look just like every other anonymous-looking government-run stand-up café, with no name out front, no chairs, nowhere to sit. People stand around small counter-tops, talking in small groups.

It is, however, more of a "scene" than anything else I'd come across in the USSR. There are perhaps a hundred people, artists, young students, long-haired youth, a dozen punks and even a junkie or two, though it was the kind of ambience where it was possible that the "junkies" just wanted to look like they were junkies. There were also simple passers-by, and every so often a militiaman would come in, walk around, look everyone over and then leave; a few high-ranking military officers wandered in with chic women dangling on their arms. The scene didn't recall anything I knew in West Germany. No one really knew why it had been nicknamed the Saigon Café; one student offered that it resembled what people imagined Saigon to be like be-

fore the Americans fled: seedy, run-down, corrupt and dangerous.

Indeed, I'd just gotten my coffee when a man walks up to the young student standing next to me, casually slides a book out from inside his overcoat and hands it over. The student studies it discreetly, and then they whisper a moment and the student hands over quite a few roubles. I ask about the book: the student reluctantly shows it to me, very quickly — a history of mid-nineteenth century philosophy — then apologises that he must leave.

A couple of attempts to engage people in discussion about Armenia wind up in deadends; from my experience so far I deduce that it is not so much out of lack of interest as that discussing sensitive topics with a Westerner in a crowded café is still too much for most people even under glasnost.

I go out front and step up to a guy who would have fit right in with the Autonomen in West Berlin: very young, with a spiked green Mohawk haircut and a black leather jacket with "Long Live Free Punk" written in English on the back along with an A with a dot over it, which seems to be the local symbol for anarchism. He said that there were not many punks, that it was hard to be one in the USSR.

— The militia took me in, they beat me up just a couple of days ago, he said, showing me a scar on his forehead.

I said that it happens in the West too. I observed that there was a lot of struggle among the punks and Autonomen in West Germany and Britain, that some were revolutionaries, some fascists. What was going on here?

— Same thing. That guy there, he said, pointing to a similar looking fellow who I'd intended to try to talk to next, he's a fascist. Don't see him. He's no good. I'm not a fascist, I'm not anything. I'm just a dirty punk, just a dirty punk.

— Oh, I said, trying to digest this. Well, what's it like for you here, can you get work?

— Of course I don't work. Punks don't work. And who do you think would hire me?

We talked briefly, for he spoke little German, then I asked about

getting hold of him again. He said that it didn't matter because he was leaving in a few hours to go back home to Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, a few hundred miles from Leningrad.

— Are there many punks in Tallinn?

— Not really. I'm the punk in Tallinn.

— Only you?!

— Well, there's a few others, but they're not completely serious. There's a lot more of us here in Leningrad.

A young boy, maybe 12 or 13 years old, who was hanging out with him, then piped in that he was a punk too, and that there were more and more of them in Leningrad, at least several dozen.

I asked the older punk what he thought needed to happen in the USSR. He held out his hand, palm up, then turned it upside down.

The Moscow Station, the largest train station in Leningrad, late at night:

It's filled with all sorts of people, well dressed Muscovites returning home, peasant women sleeping on benches, floors or anywhere else they can, soldiers playing cards, a few Asians I can't recognise, probably Uzbeks. But not the least of its inhabitants are the drunks. There are occasional fights. A large puddle of blood in the middle of the floor goes untouched the whole 30 minutes or so I'm there. The militia haul off a drunk every few minutes, dragging them with their feet scraping along the ground, presumably heading to gaol to dry out.

It is painfully obvious that alcoholism still ravages Russia, debilitating everything from labour productivity, a major concern of Gorbachev, to male-female relations. When I asked one older woman, Vera, about the Soviet policy of encouraging Russian women to have children, she said that one of the reasons this was happening was that, because of their enormous long-term intake of alcohol, quite a few Russian men couldn't produce offspring. Though I wondered if she exaggerated, still it pointed to the enormity of the problem. Vera continued to live with her husband, she

confided, but he now had a mistress because he and she had ceased being lovers long ago — one of the main reasons was his drinking. She stayed with him because her generation looked down on divorce and because he made a good salary.

Encouraging Russian women to have more children is an element of the crusade underway in the USSR to “make it possible for women to return to their purely womanly mission,” as Gorbachev puts it — which means chaining women even more tightly to their traditional role as mothers and homemakers. The government is concerned that the “Islamic population” is increasing faster than the Russians, so birth control is discouraged; this has led to a situation where the average Russian woman has had to resort to several abortions — some estimates are as many as six or seven. Contraception is no easier to get under *perestroika* than before, and Russian women are even being offered cash incentives to produce more than a single child.

Divorce is rising dramatically, especially among the younger generation, to the point that the divorce rate in the big Russian cities is one divorce for every two marriages, almost as high as in the West. The single mothers I met seemed resigned to a very difficult life, and complained of the same frenetic schedule and social isolation as face single mothers in West Germany.

I thought of how frequently Western academics compare social life in Russia today with the West in the '50s. The comparison was off, for many reasons — but perhaps it hit one correct point: that beneath the tranquil surface of Russia in the 1980s lay a rotten social foundation displaying many of the same symptoms as the West had just before it exploded into the rebellions of the '60s.

On the way home that night I ask directions from a young woman, Irina, who decides to accompany me to the hotel. It turns out that she too is a medical student. I tell her about my encounter with Vassily; she marvels, and tries to figure out if she might know the guy.

— But of course he's right to want

to go to the West, she goes on. In the West there's more opportunity: if you're bright and work hard you can make money and become somebody; if you're not intelligent, then you won't make it, and you'll be a nobody. She smiles.

Even until then, late in the trip, being in the USSR had retained a sense of mystery and excitement for me — though I knew Soviet society was essentially the same as what I was already familiar with, nonetheless it offered new twists to be discovered and analysed, and particularly the challenge of trying to find more rebellious people. With Irina's words however I felt the same heavy weight that I sometimes felt back home when I'd come on one too many “good German” right in a row — the thick layer of bourgeois muck that would weigh down on anyone trying to explode Soviet society into the air from below.

The next day on Nevsky Prospect I encounter another musician, Anton, a “metalisti,” he says, which refers to “heavy metal,” but the categories don't always transfer too neatly. Anton is a huge, imposing figure, almost two meters tall, clad in leather, but with a voice so soft and gentle that I wondered whether he should have been singing children's lullabies instead of hard rock anthems. His mother and father both worked in the coal mines in the Donets river basin, the heartland of modern Russia. Anton's father was killed in a mining accident when he was a young boy, and his mother now lives with another man. He left home to come here and try to make it as a musician. When I asked how long he'd been a musician, Anton holds his hand up to his knee: “since I was this high,” he grins.

I ask Anton what he sings about. — Ancient Russia. Especially the epoch of Mongol Tartar domination hundreds of years ago.

— Why this?

— Because the Russian people have suffered for a long time and they have never really gotten what they deserve. We often must do this: sing about the past to tell about the present.

He thinks that though Gorbachev might be a tiny bit better, he's es-

entially the same; he runs things for himself and his cronies. Anton has a song about how the Russian people have been forced for too long to live like slaves:

— It will take more than someone like Gorbachev to teach us how to live as free people.

He had a few ups and down in his musical career, including because he sang songs against the war in Afghanistan, even though they were allegorical, before it was a popular thing to do. Now he thinks there should be a monument to the soldiers who fought and died in Afghanistan but who have been forgotten by the society. He tells me of friends he had who came back, and that they are different, they have continual problems. I tell him what happened at Bitburg, where the W. German government and Reagan tried to “honour” the soldiers of Nazi Germany in order to build up nationalism and pro-war sentiment in general — doesn't he think there might be a parallel, that honouring veterans of Afghanistan means honoring the war? He is upset at the very thought:

— No, look, the Soviet government doesn't make propaganda to glorify the soldiers; instead, it has a policy of doing everything it can to ignore the soldiers and pretend like they don't exist. Talking about them is a way to go into what they've been through and expose what the war was really about. It doesn't support it.

Throughout the trip I tried to be cautious about drawing quick conclusions about many things I saw in the USSR. But though Anton from the Donets basin is as thoroughly Russian a figure as I will meet on my trip, I feel like I've seen him many times in West Germany: his big, friendly heart, his “innocent” humanist intentions, his populism, whose devotion to the cause of the working people of his country is all mixed up with devotion to the country itself. Anton's thinking reflected the conditions of life of the large section of Russian workers which is on the one hand exploited and oppressed by the Soviet ruling class, but on the other has become somewhat bourgeoisified, is constantly promoted as the beneficiary of

Soviet "socialism" and strongly identifies with Russia. Here, I felt, was an explanation of this gentle pacifist who sings songs of the glory of the peasant rebels of ancient "Rus."

I ask Anton about the problems of the national minorities. He thinks that the problems are not so bad in the USSR as they are in the West bloc. (The Soviet media obviously devotes much attention to the racial problems in the West, especially the U.S. — just like the Western media loves to report on Armenia, the Baltic Republics, and, in W. Germany, on the problems of the Volga Germans, etc. Thus it often happens that Soviet citizens are well informed about the Ku Klux Klan, Günter Walraff's book about being Turkish in Germany, the number of homeless in New York or London, and so on, but are forced to get their news about Armenia or the Baltic Republics by word of mouth.)

Anton went on:

— Here there's a difference: our minority peoples have their own republics where they can go, which, for example, Black people in America don't have. But on the other hand things may be getting worse. He doesn't know why.

Near the Neva River, we pass by a large hotel for foreigners; a couple of women who appear to be prostitutes wait not far from one of the entrances. Anton's embarrassment is evident; I ask him if there is much prostitution.

— More and more, he says. "Those poor women, how they must suffer." His concern is obviously genuine and deep.

— Why is it happening? I ask.

— More and more people have the idea that money buys everything, I suppose, plus, he adds after a pause, perhaps out of concern for me, there's the Western tourists who have money and fancy goods to buy Russian women.

He tells me about a popular play from Leningrad which concerns the hundreds of prostitutes who were rounded up in Moscow just before the 1980 Olympics, and who were kept together in camps away from the foreign media in order to preserve the "socialist" image of

the USSR. According to the play, the prostitutes are run by the Soviet "mafia," whom Anton bitterly dislikes. The Soviet "mafia" is an expression which has been greatly popularised under Gorbachev and generally refers to a network of extremely rich gangsters who run the black market and who are *outside* the party, though it can refer to people in the CPSU who are seen as more or less bought off. The "mafia" are also targeted in a very popular recent film, *Assa* — pro-Gorbachev forces view them as one of the chief obstacles to cleaning up corruption, and thus to the success of perestroika and glasnost. This anti-"mafia" campaign, whether orchestrated or simply heavily promoted from the top, clouds the issue of who are the real exploiters in Soviet society — the new bourgeoisie headquartered in the top ranks of the CPSU itself. The anti-"mafia" campaign seems to have taken root more in Russia than in the national republics, where people are at least clear that the main enemy is not corrupt black marketeers.

Anton thinks that there is no danger of war because the Soviet peoples could never be mobilised to fight the West. If there's any danger it comes from an attack from the West, especially the U.S., though he harbors fear of a reunited Germany as well. He thinks it is very important for music from the USSR to reach the West, and dreams one day of performing in London and New York so that American and Western youth could see and learn about the Russian people through music. However he would never emigrate from Russia. Why?

— I was born here, my home, my life, my fate, it is here.

Thoughts on Leaving

Before my trip, I read over a couple of novels which foretell the apocalyptic disintegration of the USSR in the near future, generally because of a revolt against poverty in Russia combined with rebellion of the national minorities in Central Asia, the Baltic Republics and the Caucasus. Though the authors are invariably pro-Western and loath to

see any comparisons with the seething anger among the oppressed nationalities and immigrant workers in their own empire, they have hit at a certain truth about possibilities in the USSR. One could hardly venture a guess, however, whether such upheavals were closer, or further, than in the West.

A revolutionary organising in the USSR would face many of the same obstacles as in the West: the burden of a protracted period of "peaceful" development there and some improvement in the material conditions of life for many people, despite real and deepening problems, and a general passivity among the average Russian where the view prevails that however difficult things might be they are still tolerable. Even as far as Gorbachev is concerned, though his shake-up is giving space for the growth of different and often opposing developments, still there is a sense that forces high in the state itself are pushing for improvements, for their own reasons, and that, even if they can't be relied on, they can be pushed from below to meet the people's aspirations. Some bourgeois critics who were formerly opponents of the government, like Sakharov and Medvedev — who always hated genuine revolution and in the early 1970s called on the Soviet government to beware the "extreme danger" of the Cultural Revolution, which they denounced as "Chinese totalitarian nationalism" — are now prominent supporters of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Opposition movements have sprung up everywhere, but many of these, especially in Russia itself, are at the same time *loyal* oppositions.

But the consequences of any misstep for Gorbachev and Co. may well be dramatic. People's aspirations are running far faster, further and in different directions than those on the CPSU agenda, especially among the youth and the oppressed nationalities. Many people sense that now is the time to act. The Soviet bourgeoisie has the political initiative — but sections of the masses are developing some of their own. Imagine a Soviet citizen on a short stay in Western Europe; it is doubtful they would find the

fervent political debate I found. Indeed, I wondered whether such political ferment could be found anywhere else in the imperialist world today. The "red bourgeoisie" has in a sense crossed a Rubicon: they can no longer clamp down in the old way, and any attempt to go back would require not simply reinstating the old methods but stepping up repression and control in a qualitatively new and more dangerous way. Broad masses, the intelligentsia and the oppressed nationalities, especially youth like those met on this trip, would view such a development as a move to decisively bury their dreams, in their opinion, for as long as they live. It is an understatement to say that they would not take this lightly.

Moreover, some of the insularity which has characterised the Soviet people's perceptions of their position in the world are breaking down. What has happened in Afghanistan is giving rise to speculation and thought on the relation between this and overall conditions. I recall seeing a videoclip of a debate held with some Americans in a Soviet university several years ago, where when the Americans began to talk of Soviet napalming of villages and "genocide" in Afghanistan the Soviet students cat-called and laughed at this as ridiculous. The German commentator caustically observed that they were a hand-picked audience. Perhaps they were. But no one is laughing now. There has been a significant shift in mood around Afghanistan, which has raised questions about just what the Soviet Union and the Soviet Army are all about. Returning veterans have sharpened polarisation about attitudes towards the war. Some have formed vigilante gangs and set out to "clean up" the Soviet society they risked their lives to protect, including by beating up punks, dissidents and the like. Others have brought out enough of the truth to seriously undermine the government's own rationale for the war. Large numbers of the youth I talked to took for granted the parallel between Afghanistan and Vietnam. And Vietnam, they were taught, was a "crime" of the American

"ruling circles." What are they to conclude Afghanistan resulted from? An "error," as their leaders say, a "defect" of an otherwise healthy system... or something more fundamental, such as "the system" itself?

Ironically, one phenomenon which the Soviet leaders have much feared, the populace's increasing contact with and exposure to the West, has also had the effect of teaching a significant section of the people, especially youth like the singers in Moscow's Old Arbat, enough about the West that they have decided on their own terms that Western capitalism offers no real alternative. In their case, this has not given rise to demoralisation nor to returning to the Soviet fold, but to a deeper searching and to a developing stand against both blocs. Nonetheless, as they have taken up their struggle they grab, in Engels' phrase, for whatever weapon is at hand — and more often than not, these are forms of bourgeois ideology, especially nationalism and bourgeois democracy, but in any case based on some premise other than the complete overthrow of Soviet social-imperialism.

The need for a deeper understanding of the national question in the USSR and the urgency of this were posed sharply. For me, for example, Azerbaidzhan had always meant *Iranian* Azerbaidzhan, the Third World. Though nationalism was not my outlook, still the nationalism of the oppressed nations fighting imperialism evoked reflex support from me and was different from, say, the nationalism of imperialist countries which went for one imperialist against another.

Initially I took a similar attitude towards Soviet Azerbaidzhan. But for a number of world-historic reasons, it is not the same as Iranian Azerbaidzhan. Soviet Azerbaidzhan is an oppressed nation, but *within* an imperialist country; it occupies a different position in the world imperialist system and has a different history than does Iranian Azerbaidzhan, including a period of socialist development under Lenin and Stalin.

The awakening nationalist sentiments in Azerbaidzhan and the

Soviet East nonetheless represent, at least for the most part, righteous resistance to national oppression, and they are giving the new Tsars a big headache; but they also pose a great challenge to those who want to seize this awakening to eliminate *all* oppression and inequality.

In my debates with the rebels in the USSR over this tangled web of contradictions, my heart ached as I witnessed their struggle to sort through their friends and enemies and to chart a path forward without ever even having had the chance to study Mao or to have been exposed to the lessons he summed up of the restoration of capitalism in the very country in which they must do battle.

Indeed, in the USSR everyone must read Lenin — but where are the Leninists? The conditions under which the rebels of the USSR struggle are not easy. But they *are* struggling, and under more favourable conditions than for a long time. For their own reasons, the Soviet bourgeoisie has shaken things up. The ice has broken. But just what will come out on top remains to be determined, and many things that can be seen reaching up to the surface hearten any revolutionary. The forms of oppression in the USSR are indeed different — the plundering rag of the fatherland here is the ever present hammer-and-sickle red flag. I thought often of Mao's analysis that the transition from capitalism to communism would be protracted and difficult, that the proletarian dictatorship was fragile and could be easily defeated from within — as indeed it was. But Mao also pointed out that, if the rightists seize power and restore capitalism, they will know no rest and their people will give them no peace. Whatever form capitalist madness assumes, Soviet "socialism" or any other, it is still madness: life asserts itself, people rebel, and their struggles, their hopes and dreams inevitably burst forth in the same general direction as those of rebel slaves around the world. □