

Free!

Volume 1
Number 1 *Free!*


Article 41

2-1973

Lenin and Company

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Recommended Citation

Gold, Alan (1973) "Lenin and Company," *Free!*: Vol. 1: No. 1, Article 41.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/free/vol1/iss1/41>

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Lenin and Company

(Last Summer, UNI's Russian Language Institute spent 9 weeks in the USSR. Some of their experiences, as told to me by Terri Eckebrecht, follow.—Alan Gold)



Leningrad. They stood before a guide in the middle of the cathedral. Scattered throughout the room: old women.

He was going on about it was built in such and such, just real businesslike, like it was a museum. But all these people were standing around praying, you know, and I felt so out of place and he just acted so cold, like it doesn't matter, they don't mean anything. All these old women started to talk about us, turning around, and were pointing at us, and he told them to shut up, to be quiet if they don't want to leave.

Commie-fearing Americans will no doubt appreciate such an account, clutching it to their bosoms, nodding "I told you so."

But is the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics really an oppressive, heartless state that we must somehow coexist with until it disintegrates from its own lack of passion? Or is it the people's utopia, the vanguard of a Golden Age of peace and equality?

Ask a Russian. Ask a lot of Russians.

But first you have to get into their country. After flying through a cloud that stretched all the way from Iowa to Europe, the Russian Language Institute was delayed by customs officials.

They checked what kind of literature we had and everything we were bringing in. One guy had a "Playboy" and they wanted to confiscate it as pornography, but finally they let him bring it in.

The first ten days were spent at an old folks' home in Dyuny studying the four C's (conversation,

composition, culture, and civilization) under a group of soviet professors. One of the visual aids for these classes was Peter the Great's palace on the Gulf of Finland. The Russians have almost finished restoring the palace (which was devastated by the Germans during World War II) to its original condition, complete with chandeliers, crystal and gold, a must for fashionable 18th century czars. A series of photographs reveals the extent of the destruction, with a companion set to indicate how each room has been reconstructed. Outside, one finds that Peter was Edenistic besides being a hydromaniac . . .

You'd walk on little paths through his grounds and it was all gardens and all kinds of really strange fountains; pyramid fountains, and little kids fountains, and trick fountains that would squirt people.

At last the Institute was ready to begin touring in earnest, but the changes in time (8 hours) and diet (greasy) along with the fact that the sun never set, had made Terri sick.

Moscow had smog . . . always so busy and they'd keep us on the run, they'd never let us rest—Get up. Eat breakfast. Go on a tour. Eat lunch. Go on another tour. Eat supper. And by then you're so dead you're about ready to just fall asleep. But sometimes my roommate and I would go out dancing at night.

Many restaurants have live music, ranging from traditional folk to westernized big band to fiftyish rock & roll. Records by groups like Led Zeppelin and the Doors are popular among the Russian kids who knew how to get them. It is not uncommon to see boys dancing with boys, and girls with girls, although mixed couples are also very popular.

Reds and Blue Jeans

We'd start dancing our way and everybody'd stop and look at my roommate and—(gasp)—because we'd be down there in blue jeans instead of a dress and my God, they'd just flip out—they couldn't believe it.

A lady doesn't wear pants. I wore shorts one day in Moscow and I swear they've never seen a pair of shorts in their lives.

When we got in a little town and I'd wear my jeans and a midriff top, people would stop in the street in their cars. People would come up to you in the street and some guys would start to flirt with you, and some guys would heckle you. Old women would come up and yell and call you every name in the book and 'how disgusting are you!'

Genuine blue jeans will bring in up to fifty rubles on the black market. (On the open market they are nonexistent.) Tourists entering the country are advised to avoid shady dealings with local marketeers. Special undercover police roam the streets eager to arrest unsuspecting suspects.

One day a newfound friend left Terri briefly, they returned with an icon, a slab of wood bearing a haloed image of Christ that he had probably found in a field. She expected him to quote a price of a

hundred rubles or so, but instead he explained that it was free if she could get it through customs on the way back home. Grateful, she buried it in her suitcase, swearing herself to secrecy.

In all the cities, in the main part, there's always a statue of Lenin. And on the buildings and on the trains they'd have these communist slogans like 'Long live the People,' 'Glory to Lenin,' 'Glory to Soviet Labor,' and these are plastered everywhere along with Lenin's picture.

Apparently the repetition of such morale boosters had a subliminal effect. Certainly the citizens do not notice them anymore and the spirit of Lenin becomes immanent instead of imposed. The result is pride in one's city that makes it more habitable than its American counterparts.

I felt safer there. In Moscow at two o'clock in the morning you can go out and walk down Gorky Street, the main street, and down to Red Square all by yourself and no one would say anything to you. It was really hard to get used to. When I went back to Frankfurt and Amsterdam you had to be on your toes because people were trying to pick your pockets. But never anything in Russia. You were safe to go anywhere.

Of course, few people, criminal or otherwise, were out at two in the morning. They are mostly at home in bed practicing mankind's favorite passtime. Sleep is cheap.

The populace works hard during the day; someone has to paint those signs. Others are employed to maintain urban areas. The cities have immaculate gardens and parks; nationwide contests are conducted to pick the most beautiful metropolis in the land.

Everywhere you go, there are these little old women and they have these brooms made out of sticks and they constantly sweep streets and sidewalks. Even on the beaches they'd be out sweeping the garbage

It was really a clean place.

Still, Terri was ill. Until one Saturday when they took an excursion to the Caucasus Mountains. They spent the night in a small village and on Sunday morning continued onward and upward through the highest part of the range.

They came across a group of women weaving and knitting various articles. The visitors made a few purchases at the open market and continued into the mountains stopping for lunch by a waterfall. Lunch developed into a large picnic with

tons of food, wine, cognac, and mountain water. It was the best day of the whole trip for me. I'll always remember it.

The mountain air proved to be a miracle cure for her illness and she had no more trouble after that.

But there were classes the next day.

Thousands of old orthodox churches grace the Russian landscape. Many are closed, converted to warehouses or emptiness, but some remain active. A few magnificent cathedrals survive with their frescoes, their mosaics, and their gold. Religion is generally tolerated, though not encouraged.

Yet, dissatisfied Jews receive international head-



lines and sympathy. Random citizens were questioned, always replying that the issue is exaggerated, that it is not extraordinarily difficult for Jews to emigrate and furthermore, some who have left are now returning to their native land.

We'd ask different people and they'd always say there wasn't that big a problem—

Then there were non-malicious counter charges that America persecutes minority groups, charges based on the belief that new world streets are scarred daily by armed racial conflict.

And we'd say it was sort of the same—held true for some things in America—that some people would try to distort it and make things slightly out of proportion. And they sort of snickered at us when we said that. Yet we were supposed to believe them when they would talk about Czechoslovakia or the Jews.

Dick and Angela

Pat and Dick Nixon had recently dropped by that part of the world on a much acclaimed mission of peace and goodwill. Only six weeks later, few of the local inhabitants offered any comment on that subject.

They were interested in who we were going to vote for, but didn't really say anything for or against Nixon. Everywhere we went, though people asked us about Angela Davis. 'What do we think of Angela Davis?' 'Wow, isn't Angela Davis really something!'

When we left she was just finishing her trial, so we didn't know that much about what was happening, so we couldn't really answer them. But old people, young people, everyone always asked us about Angela Davis.

The newspapers are mostly printed in Russian.

The newspapers are mostly Pravda.

A foreigner lacking practical experience with the language must rely on hearsay for international news. Isolation is inevitable.

It didn't bother me for a couple of weeks, and then one day we went to this prison camp, a German concentration camp that they made into a national monument. It struck me as I was walking through it, how cruel people can be to each other. All of a sudden it came back to me about Viet Nam and Israel and Ireland and how people are still fighting and hating each other. It really snapped me back into reality and after that it really bothered me.

However, insulation from the "outside world" was not complete. A long way, many days from home,

she attended a lecture in the park. A radio laden Russian took a nearby seat. His radio was pulling in "American Pie" on the BBC.

You know how much that song revolted me, but we got ecstatic at the thought of American music.

Other cultural curios are more readily available. In "They Don't Kill Wild Horses, Do They?" Jane Fonda mouthed all the right lines but the words heard were Russian. An introductory paragraph spliced to the leader explained the downfall of capitalistic society. The story began, the audience sat back. Half-way through, the film stopped and the same social footnote reappeared. It seems that in Soviet theatres if a patron cannot afford the full price of admission he might instead purchase entrance to the first half of the movie only. If he later scrapes up an odd ruble, he is permitted to buy a ticket for the conclusion of the show.

Another excursion took them to a fifty thousand acre collective farm. As a guide led them through an apple orchard, Terri was tempted to collect a few souvenirs. She did, stuffing her pockets and purse with fallen fruit. Her companions noticed and told her in urgent whispers to throw the apples back before they all got in trouble. But then the guide



offered them a large crate and time to fill it, so Terri added her booty to the collective box.

When children on the farm come of age they are sent to their choice of either a trade school or a university, free of charge. Upon graduation they must return to work on the farm for three to five years. (Their peers in cities follow a similar plan except that the government places them in an urban job for the same length of time.) When their embryonic period is complete, they are free to seek whatever employment they desire.

People didn't want to be seen with us because their neighbors would all talk. In Georgia these kids said they were sort of frightened, they didn't want to be seen with foreigners. So they would meet us a couple of blocks away from the hotel, plus they wouldn't walk with us, they'd walk behind us and we'd walk in front of them and they'd just tell you where to go until we were quite a way from the main business district of the town. Then they'd start walking with us. But otherwise they were sort of reluctant. Or else they'd tell us 'speak Russian, don't speak English.'

But the people, no matter where you went, always went out of their way to help you. You'd be lost and they'd overhear you in a store saying you wanted to buy some fruit or something. They'd go out and they'd stick you on a tram and they'd pay for it and they'd ride with us and take us to the market. They'd help us buy the fruit and make sure that we got back to the hotel. They were the most friendly people. I want to go back as soon as I can.

The Old Buzzard

On their final day, the Institute visited Lenin's tomb in Moscow. His body is preserved in a glass case in a strictly guarded marble mausoleum. After waiting for three hours they went in. Cameras and purses are prohibited. Long lines of people view the body every day, forming a single file at one point, becoming very silent at another before entering the room that holds the deceased leader's body.

It just slipped out, I said, 'My God, I've waited a long time to see this old buzzard.' And this other guy on the trip heard me and we both started laughing and we got to the point where we had to be quiet, so I walked all the way through Lenin's tomb biting my lip. That was really terrible on my part. I'm ashamed of myself. To them Lenin is comparable to God. People saved their money all their lives and traveled eight days on the Trans-Siberian railroad to see Lenin. I was impressed. He looked really strange, almost sort of fake. His face looked so waxy.

And their time came to leave, to fly across the ocean to home. But first, there was another inspection.

We were so paranoid because we knew they were just going to come through our compartment and rip it apart. They had the guy in the compartment next to us stripped down, searching him. They went through his suitcase for false bottoms and everything.

By then David and I were going out of our minds because I had this icon. I decided, I wanted to leave so bad—I was really homesick, I decided I'm going to lay it in the top of my suitcase and if they find it I'm going to give them this song and dance about it was a present and I didn't know it was illegal to take out. But they came in and looked under the pillows and blankets and just let all of our luggage sit there and never said a word to us. David was chewing gum and smoking a cigarette and I was sitting there talking a million miles an hour and they went by and never said a word.

Somehow or other we just lucked out.