

# ONE

## First Steps

**I**n 1958, at eighteen years of age, I was about to enter university and, ultimately, make lasting decisions as to how I would spend the rest of my life. It just so happened that this period coincided with a dynamic era in the history of the Soviet Union that saw Nikita Khrushchev at the apex of his power—and led to my lifelong commitment to studying and understanding the Communist state, its peoples, and its leaders. I soon developed a consuming commitment to Soviet dissidents—their aims, their methods, their fates.

After ordering the release of a couple of million people from forced-labor camps and exile, Khrushchev, since 1953 the first secretary of the Communist Party, partially but strongly denounced Stalin in 1956 and 1961 and eased the controls over the population exercised by the Communist Party and the secret police, the KGB (Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti, the Committee for State Security). However, Khrushchev's new party program of 1961 was viewed by more conservative colleagues as fanciful utopianism, and all was pushed into reverse from 1962 on by growing opposition to the self-aggrandizing Khrushchev from these conservative colleagues in the Politburo.

Khrushchev felt compelled to respond with a risky move: placing missiles in Cuba in fall 1962, a rash venture that was soon thwarted by the skillful diplomatic and military maneuvering of President John Kennedy. But Khrushchev kept up his more innovative tendency by further easing

cultural controls at home, and allowing the publication of a frank short story by Alexander Solzhenitsyn on the heretofore forbidden theme of the labor camps, "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich," in November. The next month his opponents riposted by pushing him into going along with a big meeting of party leaders with prominent liberal writers that was designed to knock the latter into line. This led to a party-sponsored attack on them by conservative writers in March 1963.

Meanwhile, Soviet-Chinese relations had taken a further turn for the worse in the wake of Khrushchev's 1961 assault on Stalin. The Chinese leaders, inspired by Mao Zedong, expressed abhorrence of this assault and didn't give up until, in October 1964; after much maneuvering in the Politburo, this top Soviet political body removed its colleague Khrushchev from power in a carefully staged, nonviolent Kremlin coup. Khrushchev was allowed to live out his days under a relatively mild form of house arrest (which gave him the opportunity to secretly dictate some quite revealing memoirs and have them smuggled out to the West, where they appeared in English in 1971). At the same time the Politburo adopted a more benevolent attitude to Stalin, thus somewhat appeasing the Maoists in China.

In Khrushchev's stead a collective party leadership troika of Leonid Brezhnev, Aleksei Kosygin, and Nikolai Podgorny emerged in which Brezhnev became a clear first among equals from 1968 on. In 1964-65, this troika eased the reins a little: for example, they released from labor camps and exile most of the few hundred political and religious prisoners whose punishment for peaceful dissent Khrushchev had commissioned or endorsed. But in fall 1965 they tightened the reins again, including in the reversal of the less hostile attitudes toward the West that they had shown in their first year.

### *Why Learn Russian, and Why Do It in Ireland?*

"Welcome to Collon!" said a smiling Captain Nikolai Couriss, as I arrived at his remote home in Ireland in September 1958 to start learning Russian. Thus began two weeks of exhilarating, idiosyncratic instruction that I shall never forget.

Disaster had just struck the inhabitants of the modest house in the sleepy little town of Collon, to the north of Dublin, near Drogheda. Their entire mushroom crop had been wiped out by blight. The annual sale of this crop made up a large part of their income. Nonetheless, Captain Cour-

iss, a former tsarist diplomat; his wife, Elizaveta, a former nurse who had been her husband's colleague in General Anton Denikin's White Army (which the Bolsheviks eventually pushed out of Russia in 1921); and their aged friend Prince Pavel Lieven, who was about eighty and the grandfather of my future colleague Dominic ("Chai") Lieven, set cheerfully to work earning the rest of their living: instructing students in the Russian language who also paid them for lodging and board.

There were not many of us—only one or two at a time, and then not year-round. Two cadets from the military college of Sandhurst departed as I arrived, and a student from Cambridge University came just before me and was assigned to the one spare room in the Courisses' modest dwelling. I was placed in a house across the road, as a lodger.

Why, you may wonder, had I decided to learn Russian? In 1956, when the Soviet leader Khrushchev gave his acclaimed speech denouncing Stalin for monstrous crimes against humanity and the Soviet people, I was sixteen and oblivious to Khrushchev. But the next year, a young Hungarian refugee, Paul Magyar, came to my school and gave a talk to a small group of advanced students of modern languages, my own field being French and German. I was much impressed by Magyar's quiet, low-key description of the horrifying events he had witnessed the previous year during the Hungarian Revolution: the violent suppression of the Hungarian anti-Communist revolutionaries by the tanks of the USSR and some of its allies in the Eastern Bloc. Tens of thousands of people had been killed or imprisoned, and many more thousands driven abroad.

Magyar's presentation inspired trust. He aroused feelings of sympathy for the victims of Stalin and his successors, thus creating fertile soil for a suggestion that my father made to me soon after. This was that at Cambridge University I might do better than just become one of hundreds of graduates in the commonly studied languages of French and German. Instead, I might embrace a neglected language that showed signs of becoming more important and, therefore, more in demand. Given the Soviet Union's arsenal of nuclear weapons and its aggressive ideology, and Khrushchev's partial reversal of course in cautiously opening his country to the outside world, Dad suggested that Russian might be a good choice.

He also reminded me that he had published a book in 1935, *The Russian Financial System*, based on the research that he and a senior colleague at the Bank of England had done in Moscow. In addition, he stressed that

his own father, a Cambridge historian of modern Europe, had been moved by the weak understanding and neglect of Russia and Eastern Europe by Western historians to teach himself Russian and Polish quite late in life and to write a few books about this part of the world, including one about Russia's eighteenth-century monarch, the formidable Catherine the Great.<sup>1</sup> Finally, Dad mentioned that Frank Reddaway, a distant cousin of his father's, had opened a hose-making factory on the edge of Moscow in about 1880 and developed a thriving business in Russia, which diversified his core activities in Lancashire. Frank had also married a Russian woman and spent sizable chunks of time in Moscow, until the Bolshevik revolution put a nasty end to his whole eastern adventure. These various historical snippets made me more inclined to consider learning Russian.

My next step was to talk with the university's director of Slavic studies, Elizabeth Hill, a lady as formidable in her way as Catherine. She spoke fluent, expressive Russian, having been brought up by a Russian mother. She also possessed a strong and cheerful personality that welcomed challenges. Her appointment to the university had been assisted by my grandfather. Liza, as she was widely known, with the name pronounced à la russe—Leeza—said that normally a couple of years' study of Russian was a requirement for acceptance into her department. But she made exceptions for motivated beginners. So she accepted me and urged me to study with her friends the Courisses, before starting at university in October 1958.

So that's how I ended up studying beginning Russian in Ireland. My study program involved five to six hours of Russian a day: sessions of Russian grammar with Nikolai and vocabulary with Elizaveta, and—when I was ready—a further session of conversational Russian with Prince Pavel. The problem with the latter session was that it came after lunch, and usually, after a while, assisted by my halting efforts at conversation, the charming and dignified prince would drift away into a rewarding snooze.

However, the work with the Courisses and the chance to listen to, and occasionally take part in, the continuous Russian spoken at meals were enormously helpful. Probably in their mid-sixties, the Courisses were talented teachers. As I wrote to my parents from Collon: "I certainly can't imagine a much more enjoyable or efficient way of learning a language."

In addition to the "formal" study program with the Courisses and the prince, I worked for two or three hours a day in my room across the street, where I played my 78 rpm records of Assimil's "Teach Yourself Russian"

on the gramophone I'd brought with me. The Courisses were impressed by these, which were new to them, and much preferred them to their own Linguaphone discs.

For recreation, I played chess in the evening with Captain Couriss. This was fun, because we were equally bad and each of us had a similar number of wins and losses. Also, he introduced me to a couple of nearby families, both of which had private squash courts. I greatly appreciated the chance to play a number of games with good opponents. One of the houses was owned by a Count Tolstoy, whom Nikolai regarded as a Soviet fellow-traveler. At the Tolstoy's I could also take a bath. This aroused envy in the Couriss household, which owned neither a bathtub nor a shower! Ireland appeared to contain very few Russians, and these few had lively suspicions of each other.

Alas, after that summer I never returned to Collon to learn more from the Courisses. Soon after I left, Nikolai trained to become a priest in the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, and was sent to run a parish in Liverpool.

### *Off to Cambridge*

These years of undergraduate education ended with my earning a degree in modern languages that could more accurately have been called a Russian studies degree because I had focused virtually all of my energy on Russian language, literature, and history.

My most colorful professor was Elizabeth Hill, whose course on spoken Russian I attended with great benefit in my first year. The course was designed for students in the government-sponsored two-year program to train selected military officers performing their regular "national service." I didn't know about this course until it was too late for me to consider applying for it. The program's goal was to train not just eavesdroppers for listening in to Soviet communications, but also interpreters and translators who would quickly be available if war with the Soviet Union should threaten or break out. Hill's course was too advanced for me, but she allowed me to sit in. But by sitting through it and trying to understand the exuberant, often humorous, Hill in her give and take with the budding interpreters, I learned a lot that was hard to absorb in other ways. In particular, apart from vocabulary, I learned how Russian words are pronounced and how remarks and sentences are typically inflected.

Another professor—almost equally colorful—was Nikolai Andreyev, a fine medievalist whose English was sometimes delightfully quirky because he had only spent some fifteen years in the West. I much enjoyed his lectures on history and my tutorials with him in his home.

The precise opposite of Hill and Andreyev in terms of colorfulness was a scholar and teacher whom I greatly respected and saw often. This was my main academic supervisor, Alexis Vlasto, who spoke softly and seemed intent on not being noticed. His two quiet passions were Russian studies, especially early Slavic history, and gardening. The fine garden behind his house on Adams Road was the product of his untiring labors. He often tended its soil with his own bare hands, as he planted or uprooted particular vegetables and flowers. This I deduced from sitting near him during supervisions, when his muscular hands bore plenty of garden dirt visible in their creases.

Once one got used to his extreme modesty and low-key style, he was a good and interesting teacher and an exceptional scholar. For his finely written and well-received book *The Entry of the Slavs into Christendom: An Introduction to the Medieval History of the Slavs* (1968), on which he worked for many years, he used contemporary medieval sources in, among other languages, Arabic, Persian, ancient Greek, and Church Slavonic, some of which, to the best of my knowledge, he learned especially in order to research the book.

One teacher whose lectures on Russian history I attended assiduously, Mr. Young, was not a well-known scholar, because he had not, as far as I'm aware, published anything. But he knew a lot about different aspects of Russian history from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, and was good at explaining it in straightforward terms. I recall with particular interest his analyses of Catherine the Great's foreign policy and of the Bolsheviks' struggle to take power throughout Russia from 1917 to 1921.

### *Summer 1960: First Trip to the USSR*

My studies profited from the two trips I made to the Soviet Union during my time at Cambridge. In August 1960 I departed for a five-week trip on which I acted as an inadequate but just viable interpreter for a group of twenty medical students who planned to visit hospitals in Sweden, Finland, Poland, and the Soviet Union, traveling in a convoy of four cars. I knew four or five of the students already, and all of them turned out to be

pleasant to travel with. They had been invited by a senior Moscow doctor to visit some mental hospitals in Leningrad and Moscow. This relaxed and charming man evidently wanted to open up the especially backward—indeed, corrupted—field of psychiatry to some healthy outside influences.

I embarked on the trip as someone with a critical view of Soviet Communism, developed by my meetings with Paul Magyar, my friendship with the Courisses, and my first two years of study of Russian culture and history at Cambridge University. The reality that I found on the ground in Russia—the low standard of living, the omnipresence of the official ideology of Marxism-Leninism, the reticence of ordinary people who were frightened to be more open—was of huge interest, but was more or less what I had expected.

We took ferries from England to Sweden, then from Sweden to Finland, then drove on to Leningrad and Moscow and back home through Poland, Czechoslovakia, Germany, and Belgium. It was only the second year that foreigners had been allowed to travel in their own cars around the Soviet Union. All but a few roads were closed to us, these being on the western side of the country. My parents kindly lent us their Austin A-70, which performed valiantly on the often badly paved Soviet roads.

We slept in cheap campsites used by both Russians and foreigners, which were usually quite well set up, some having big pitched tents and boarded floors. The food was mostly mediocre, but outstanding local dairy products were available: kefir (fermented milk), slivki (cream), smetana (sour cream), and tvorog (white farmer's cheese). For our food supply we had successfully solicited sizable contributions from firms that wanted to be associated with a big trip to the largely unknown Soviet Union, so in the campsites we enjoyed powdered coffee, Ovaltine, Marmite, jams, apple dumplings, steak and kidney pie, and so on, all in tins or bottles. In other countries, if memory serves, such campsites were nonexistent and we always had to find spots to pitch our own tents.

Our biggest source of cash was an impressive stack of rubles that we had bought from a firm called Brown, Shipley in London at a price five times as favorable as the official exchange rate in the USSR. Changing money on the black market also turned out to be surprisingly easy, if done carefully, and at about the same rate as in London.

On leaving Finland, the only real problem with our first Soviet camp, in Repino, was that it was about thirty miles short of Leningrad. Furthermore, the road into the city was a mass of potholes. The Lenin-

grad–Moscow highway was not nearly as bad. That road took us through Novgorod, where we stopped for a few hours to admire the ancient churches and other buildings dating from centuries as distant as the twelfth.

The impressions I got of the mental institutions in the two major cities were rather general. All of the buildings were gray and rundown, with little ornament, and the institutions were largely silent places. We were received politely but not warmly, and except for a “receiving doctor” in each institution, who showed us some wards, we had very few chances to talk with patients, doctors, or nurses. Electroshock therapy appeared to be the prevalent form of treatment. To my knowledge, no Soviet doctor showed any interest in establishing ties with us or the outside world by, for example, arranging to exchange publications or future visits.

One evening in Leningrad we went to an enjoyable performance of some short ballets set to the music of Ravel. We also made time during the day for some shopping. I was in constant demand for linguistic help with this and other enterprises. One of the highlights of our whole trip was our visit to Pushkin—earlier called Tsarskoe Selo, the Tsar’s Village—and the magnificent eighteenth-century palace of Peterhof, a little way outside the city.

But most interesting to me were some social friendships that I was able to strike up outside the hospitals. At a gas station in Leningrad I met a friendly Russian of our age, Valery Lebedev, who was driving a clean and stylish Volga and spoke better English than I did Russian. After we had all moved on to Moscow Valery drove a few of us to visit his aunt, Natalya Ferdinandovna Irteneva. She spoke English as well as her nephew, which wasn’t surprising because she taught English to students at the Moscow Pedagogical State University in Moscow. She was a gracious hostess, and both she and her nephew were not afraid to behave naturally and show us that they did not support Communism.

Natalya’s late husband had been one of the main design engineers for the Volga car and received generous pay. Since they had no children, there was plenty of money to spend on a fine dacha and an equally fine “cooperative apartment”—that is, privately owned—in Moscow. They could also pay for a maid, whom they called by her patronymic surname, Petrovna. In her mid-sixties, like Natalya, she had a quirky, engaging sense of humor. Valery’s real mother had died when he was young, and he and Natalya lived in the city apartment during the teaching year, Natalya serving as a foster mother for her nephew. Later, when I spent much of 1963–64 as



a graduate student at Moscow University, in some ways she played this role for me too. She and Petrovna often cooked delicious meals for Valery and me, and we chatted about a wide range of subjects for hours. (I would encounter all three—Natalya, Valery, and Petrovna—again in later visits in 1961 and 1963–1964.)

The other Russian of our age whom it was a pleasure to get to know was Boris Kudashev, a fourth-year student of medicine in Moscow. He had volunteered to help us after learning of our planned visit through the USSR–Great Britain Society. Although he was a leader of the Young Communist League in one of the top medical colleges in Moscow, and behaved in orthodox fashion in public, he, like Valery, let a few of us know that actually he had a politically critical mind. In addition, he initiated a serious book exchange with me that continued for three years. We gave each other lists of books we would like to receive through the mail. Among Boris's mailings were some valuable books from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that he had bought in secondhand bookstores and thought I would like either to keep or to sell. Most of them I did sell or donated to the Cambridge University Library. Boris was also a kind and helpful person, and made sure to take us to two or three nice restaurants.

Our Moscow campsite, at Butovo, was nearer to the city than our Leningrad one, and the road was better. Our hospital visits were more rewarding than those in Leningrad, and we still had time to complete a basic sightseeing program: We visited massive Red Square, the extravagant St. Basil's Cathedral, and its architectural opposite, Lenin's austere, unadorned tomb, with one of whose designers, Alexander Pasternak, the brother of the writer Boris Pasternak, I later became friendly. We also enjoyed a performance at the Bolshoi Theater of the ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, set to the music of Prokofiev.

Less enjoyable was a very lucky escape from what might have been an appalling car crash just outside Moscow. To avoid it, our driver instinctively drove straight into the ditch rather than collide head-on with a motorbike doing about 100 m.p.h. None of us was hurt, but our car was pretty much a write-off. We left it behind in Russia and squeezed into three cars for the rest of the trip.

*Summer 1961: The USSR by Land Rover*

A year later, a very different sort of trip took shape, as I and four others, traveling in a long-wheel-base Land Rover, drove to Moscow and then sped south for a seven-week tour of the Black Sea region and Georgia, driving back west through Kiev and Lvov.

Four of us were friends from King's College, and the fifth, Duncan Noel-Paton of Emmanuel College, a close friend of mine, was proclaimed an honorary Kingsman, at least for the summer. Soon, Duncan, Anthony Figgis, Jonathan Steele, our mechanic, Patrick Finn, and I became a cheerful and resourceful fivesome. My father made the trip possible by lending us the money to buy the secondhand 1958 Land Rover—later we sold it and repaid him. We each scrounged up enough cash to cover the modest costs along the way. In addition to our sleeping bags and camping gear, we brought along a lot of food, some of it supplied to us free, as in 1960, by food companies.

To raise interest among ordinary Russians, we painted a board a light Cambridge blue, wrote on it in bold Cyrillic letters "Cambridge—Moscow—Black Sea" ("Kembridzh—Moskva—Chernoje More"), and attached it to the car above the windscreen. (This device would pay off, we would later learn, when we reached what was then Georgia.)

Fitting five people into a heavily loaded car proved surprisingly easy. Three sat in the front, while the other two took turns lying behind on comfortable sleeping bags and pillows, their heads against the back of the cab, enjoying the three-sided view provided by rolling up the car's canvas surrounds.

Thus prepared, we set off at the end of June 1961 for Tilbury to catch a well-appointed Swedish ferry to Gothenberg. From there we drove to Stockholm, where, after exploring the intriguing downtown for a few hours, we took another ferry to Turku in Finland and proceeded to Helsinki. Then we followed the route I knew from 1960 to the Soviet border and, beyond it, the campsite at Repino.

This time, with East-West relations deteriorating, we were discreetly followed most of the time by beefy KGB men in civilian clothes. Occasionally we couldn't resist annoying them—for example, by making a sudden U-turn and forcing them to drive past us, and then, when they were out of view, to make their own U-turn and hope to catch up with us. Their task of keeping an eye on us was made easier by the fact that we

were not allowed to depart by more than a few yards from the handful of approved roads that connected major cities.

Another way in which we felt the cooler Kremlin attitudes was when it came to changing dollars for rubles on the black market. Recently a new law had prescribed the death penalty for Soviet citizens indulging in currency exchanges. In fact, two people had promptly been executed, retroactively, for actions taken before the new law came into force. Thus, the number of people changing money had drastically declined and the exchange rate we could get in Leningrad was only twice, not five times, the official one. Moscow was even worse: we couldn't find anyone prepared to do business.

Selling our clothes was a much better proposition. What sold best, we found, were new, brightly colored nylon shirts and socks, bright woolen sweaters, and new plastic raincoats. These yielded the equivalent of five or six times their cost to us in London. Transactions needed to be conducted out of the view of observers.

#### LENINGRAD

On this trip I reveled in the historic district of Leningrad, dominated by eighteenth-century Baroque buildings. For sightseeing we linked up successfully with my friend from 1960, Elena Topchiy. She was still, to my pleasant surprise, working for the USSR–Great Britain Society, itself a member of the Society for Friendship with Foreign Countries. Elena was generous and critically minded, and had a keen sense of humor, which she no doubt concealed from her bosses, who would instead have been impressed by her outstanding English.

The weather was beautiful, and Elena took us to lots of magnificent and interesting places: Peterhof and Pushkin, and parts of the famous Hermitage palace and museum. For its formidable size, range of subject matter, the beauty of its collections, and the stunning style of its interior, the Hermitage can only be compared to the British Museum and the Louvre. Its collection of French impressionists, along with that of the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, is inferior only to that of the Jeu de Paume in Paris. Cézanne and Gauguin are particularly well represented, as are Rembrandt, van Dyck, Picasso, Matisse, Bonnard, and da Vinci.

We also explored the huge collection of art from all periods of Russian history that is held in the State Russian Museum in Leningrad and the

Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. Perhaps the latter has the edge, because it contains many first-class works by Andrei Rublev, an extraordinary early-fifteenth-century icon painter. Otherwise, my favorite artists in the Tretyakov Gallery and the Russian Museum are Ilya Repin (1844–1930), a brilliant portrait painter, especially of his wife, who was from the Caucasus region, and Isaak Levitan (1860–1900), a serene and moving painter of Russian landscapes, and some of the early-twentieth-century Expressionists.

Elena also took us to the Alexander Nevsky Lavra, an impressive monastery-cum-cathedral-cum-cemetery complex where many famous Russians are buried, including Tchaikovsky, Dostoevsky, and considerable royalty. She also introduced us to the Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism, housed in the former Kazan Cathedral, where the exhibits not surprisingly denigrated religion and idealized atheism, but the museum nonetheless was well worth a visit.

We spent many pleasant hours wandering round the streets by car and on foot, looking at spacious gardens, the Smolny Institute, the cathedral, and small palaces turned into offices. Elena was the perfect guide: informative, cheerful, witty, playful, interested in our opinions as well as her own, and always sensitive to our feelings and needs.

Finally, there was a leisurely, sun-soaked visit to the dacha outside the city belonging to my friend Sergei Repin, a scientist who had recently spent a year in Cambridge on an academic exchange. The charm of this visit is best conveyed in a letter I wrote soon afterward:

*The five of us arrived at 3:00, and soon all present—including Sergei's charming wife and small son, his mother-in-law and his aunt—launched into a three-hour dinner in the open air. The long pauses between unfailingly delicious courses were filled with smoking, conversation in Russian, English or German (Sergei's wife spoke the latter well, and taught it), and lots of drink—vodka, then Armenian or Russian wine.*

*Finally, at 6:30, we staggered upright and went for a walk through the village at a sleepy pace, drinking in an atmosphere so residential and non-productive—except for a few gardens—that we could have been in the nineteenth century. All the houses were wooden dachas in a galaxy of styles, almost all with carved balconies, some painted in exotic colors. Then we sipped tea in the twilight, using a silver samovar from Tula for the hot water, and ate mouth-watering confectioneries. At 11:00 the balmy July air*

*still invited us to continue lingering and chatting beneath the birch trees, but, reluctantly, we felt it was time to leave.*

#### TO MOSCOW VIA NOVGOROD

Our next destination was Novgorod, the famous ancient city, rather small, about halfway between Leningrad and Moscow, and the home of Alexander Nevsky. Founded in 859 as an increasingly important station on the trade route from the Baltic Sea to Constantinople, it is unique among the surviving towns of that period in that it was not ravaged by the Mongol invaders who in 1220 reached Kievan Rus'. The old buildings and their contents were not destroyed and are remarkably well preserved. By far the worst damage was done by the Germans in the Second World War, when about half the churches were bombed to the ground. A delightful and knowledgeable young guide took us round the most outstanding of the surviving churches, built in about the twelfth century in the Russian Byzantine style.

Equally engaging was the art museum, which, in addition to its exceptional Rublevs, had a fine historical section that offered an explanation as to why the Mongols didn't manage to reach Novgorod.

In Moscow our sightseeing guide, provided free by the government, was an Armenian from Georgia, Julietta Shakhbagova, who also worked for the USSR–Great Britain Society. She was friendly and reasonably knowledgeable, but professionally not on Elena Topchiy's level and much less spontaneous than Elena. Increasingly I felt that she was being paid to watch us (especially when she turned up unexpectedly in Georgia's capital, Tbilisi, when we arrived there, and again acted as our guide).<sup>2</sup>

In Moscow she took us to the well-known sights that I had seen in 1960, and also to the Permanent Exhibition of Economic Achievements, which we did not find absorbing. However, we ate at an Uzbek restaurant that served us a superb dinner of lamb shashlik.

For me, one of the highlights of our Moscow stay included a couple of marathon late-night walks through the streets of Moscow with Boris Kudashev, the medical student with whom I had been corresponding since we had become friends the previous year. Walking for three or four hours in the late evening ensured that no one could overhear our conversations.

We talked about politics and all the other sensitive issues that we both found compelling, and discovered that our views were rather similar.<sup>3</sup> In

particular, Boris's understanding and experience of Soviet politics coincided closely with my own opinions and observations. We both felt that the ideology of Marxism-Leninism that permeated the Soviet system and society was a false construct. It was based loosely on Marxism, but had been adapted over time to function as a monopolistic means for justifying the rule of a handful of men and their party, and for manipulating society to serve their ends. All this was done by using a powerful Communist Party, a widely feared secret police, and other coercive organizations.

Boris rejected many Communist principles, such as the following:

- Individualism must always be suppressed in the interests of collectivism and “dialectical materialism.”
- The arts must be practiced exclusively in tune with “socialist realism,” because only then are they socially “useful.”
- The Communist Youth League, or Komsomol, should police and record the personal and public behavior of all its members, to ensure orthodoxy and to determine whether each student, on graduating, should be dispatched nearby or faraway for his first job.
- A tourist trip abroad is a rare privilege beyond the reach of almost everyone.
- A socialist economy requires the state to own and administer nearly every component.
- Lenin and the party should be constantly adulated as the source from which all blessings flow.
- The West is consistently aggressive, and only thanks to the USSR's heroic efforts is the peace kept.

Boris had come to reject these positions largely through his work as a leading member of the Komsomol in his medical institute (Komsomol is from *Kommunisticheskiy Soyuz Molodyozhi*, meaning literally Communist Union of Youth). He had become active in the Komsomol because this was a good way to advance academically and professionally. But the manipulation of his fellow students and his growing perception of the falseness of the ideology had gradually taken him to an inwardly critical position. He could not now talk about his true opinions with anyone, not

even, it seems, his intelligent wife. And he could not afford to do anything that might redound against his father, who was a senior official of the regime. So it was a relief to be able to talk freely with me, in the instinctive knowledge that I would respond honestly to his questions and would also be discreet and not betray him.

Actually, he felt that quite a few of his fellow students held views that were critical of authority to one degree or another, but he had no idea how many. Also, he thought that political change for the better would come only slowly and inconsistently, and its nature—that is, would it emerge from neo-Leninism or from liberalism—was unpredictable. Certainly, the party would hold on to its power at all costs, if it could.

Our Moscow visit also included a drawn-out dinner at a dacha outside the city that belonged to Natalya Irteneva, whom I had also met the previous summer through her nephew Valery. He was as gentle and cultured as Natalya and studied English and German at the Moscow Pedagogical Institute. Relaxing after our trip from Moscow, we absorbed the unpretentious beauty of the dacha and its perfect setting under the birch trees in the warm sun. As soon as Valery had seated us in nice old wicker chairs beneath the birches, he began to ply us and his aunt with cognac, beer, and a brand of port. Duncan Noel-Paton, meanwhile, gave all of us a treat by quoting T. S. Eliot by the yard and talking in his most inspired way about English poetry.

After the drinking began the eating ensued and went on for two hours: stuffed peppers, smoked meats, and fresh tomatoes, some of them prepared by Natalya's eccentric, Dostoevskian servant, Petrovna. Petrovna told us that she had married for a second time specifically to inherit her new husband's apartment and money. Much to her delight, he had died a year later! This was especially good for her, because her monthly pension was no more than a pittance of twenty-five rubles.

She also asked us repeatedly to bring her a bulldog from England the next time we came, so that she could replace a beloved pet that had died. She had a shriveled, dark-skinned face, with vivacious, mischievous eyes encircled by wire-rim glasses. And she enjoyed a most unusual relationship with her employer. Natalya seemed to find her irresistibly and eternally a source of amusement as well as companionship, something on which Petrovna clearly thrived.

However, Natalya herself is my most cherished memory of our entire trip. She only allowed her sadness about the early death of her husband

to show in rare glimpses through the gracious, all-enveloping smile that came over her face at frequent intervals, a smile of spontaneous warmth and love. In general, her features displayed an open, honest, and movingly humble sensitivity, in strong contrast to the guarded, often aggressive facial expressions of the majority of her generation, all of whose surviving members had been brought up as the tempo of Stalin's terror rose. The graceful dignity of Natalya's movements never threatened to inhibit the emergence of her irrepressible playfulness. The latter, I felt, had calmly refused to be crushed by the cruel pressures of each new twist in Soviet history. I was glad that no historical quirk had deprived her of her most natural setting: an old-world dacha with a wild and entrancing garden—and an endearing old-world companion.

As we motored on south from Moscow, we came to the home of Leo Tolstoy in Yasnaya Polyana, about which Anthony Figgis wrote in his memoir:

The house is not grand, and the garden not well kept. The whole place was like us—scruffy. But it sits in gentle countryside, unhurried, unpretentious, patient, permanent. Tolstoy's life there was sometimes tempestuous, especially his relations with his wife. But the place meant so much to him that it breathes his spirit. You half expect to see him tilling the fields in bare feet, as he did, or hear his pen scratching out another chapter of 'War and Peace' in his study. We left the place feeling refreshed.

We crossed the Russian steppe on a long straight road and then drove east along the enticing Black Sea coast, called the Soviet Riviera, arriving at last in Georgia. Alas, we largely rushed through the towns of Novorossiisk, Sochi, and Sukhumi. The disintegrating, bone-rattling roads reduced our speed so much that we had very little time to stop and recline on the tempting beaches if we were to complete our tour on schedule.

#### A NOTE ON SOVIET ROADS

It is hard to say anything kind about the USSR's best roads in 1961. They were still suffering from the severe damage they endured during the Second World War, and from excessive neglect by Stalin and Khrushchev. The surfaces varied from just reasonable to deplorable, and often included



a multitude of yawning potholes and alarming corrugations, especially on hills. Bridges had to be approached and exited with great caution: their surfaces and those of the approach roads were usually of notably different heights. Bridges—like military barracks, power stations, and radio masts—were never to be photographed, since they usually rated as objects of military significance, although this was nowhere spelled out.

After dark, cars and trucks turned their lights off completely when approaching within fifty yards of oncoming vehicles. If you failed to do the same, you would be the object of intense anger and deliberately dazzling, blinding headlights. Also, bicycles, carts, and roadworks were rarely provided with lights of any sort. Traffic lights—some horizontal, some vertical in design—were located indiscriminately. For example, some were wholly absent when they were needed, others hung above the road, and others were located on posts of varying heights on the side of the road. City maps were regarded as almost military objects, and could not be obtained in most cities. Apparently there were many rules, but some were not written down, while others appeared on signs only irregularly. And the traffic police were either lazy and inattentive, or, sometimes, officious and seemingly intent on getting a bribe. That was the reality of Soviet roads.

## GEORGIA

As we approached Sukhumi, we entered what was then Georgia, but is now part of the Russia-controlled separatist entity of Abkhazia. Turning inland on still-dreadful roads, we came eventually to Stalin's birthplace of Gori. We stopped to eat spicy Georgian food in a garden restaurant, and enjoyed listening to a fine local band playing and singing with verve in the warm evening air.

Then we moved on to the capital city, Tbilisi, where for two days we visited ancient churches, wandered in the dilapidated but picturesque Old Quarter, gazed at the narrow but dignified River Kura, and learned how to drive in a city with few traffic lights. Julietta Shakhbagova, from Moscow, mysteriously reappeared and attached herself to us. The ancient churches were mostly in two places just outside the city, at the former capital of Mtskheta, where the oldest church dated from the fifth century, and on a small, grassy, sharply peaked nearby mountain that was topped by the Jvari Church, which looked down on Mtskheta and even on Tbilisi. It was built in the sixth century on numerous vast, chunky blocks of off-white stone

and, amazingly enough, has not been altered since. The pointed roofs, which looked like half-open umbrellas, a shape that has been embraced by Georgian church architects to the present day, and also the imaginative icons inside made the church well worth the climb.

A highlight of our time in Tbilisi started off on a low note. The manager of the USSR–Great Britain Society had, in our presence, booked a table on the balcony of a famous hilltop restaurant that commanded a stunning view of the city. When we arrived at the appointed hour, the manager claimed to have no knowledge of us, and said that all the balcony tables were occupied. When he rudely ignored all our representations, we said we would wait for a table to come free. An hour later nothing had happened. So we grumpily accepted an inferior table.

The menu occupied some fifty pages, but when we tried to order what we wanted, the surly waiter announced that everything on the menu had been finished except for two dishes that we did not want.

At this point a burly man from a neighboring table strode over to us and plonked down two magnums of champagne. He smiled, said nothing, and quickly returned to his group. We were flummoxed, but opened the first bottle, filled our glasses, and took them over to thank him and toast his whole table of five. He explained that he had observed how badly we were being treated and that this was especially outrageous, since we were foreigners. Foreigners should always be received with gracious hospitality.

So we pulled our tables together and launched into a discussion of many topics, some of them politically sensitive. Our new friends' waiter appeared, and it turned out that plenty of menu items were available after all, including the ones that we had selected. Drinks flowed, and by the end of the evening there were eleven empty bottles on the floor—for ten people.

Our host was the champion toast maker, proclaiming in stentorian tones for the whole restaurant to hear: “Democracy—yes! Communism—no!” followed by “Georgia—yes! Russia—no!” and “England—yes! Georgia—yes!” After each negative declaration, he spat on the floor with a demonstrative lurch of his whole body. The guests in the restaurant appeared to enjoy these bold proclamations as much as we did.

He explained to us that the manager must have accepted a hefty bribe to give our table away to someone else, and thought he could just hardnose us without difficulty. Also, our friend flatly refused to let us pay our share of the bill, on the grounds that we were respected visitors who should be treated with special courtesy.

We concluded that the sum of his behavior showed him to be a man of influence, whose friends could easily outpunch those of the manager, and who had no fear of the KGB. We also got a useful lesson in how strongly Communism and Russia were disliked among many Georgians.

We had already gained some idea of this when we stopped the car several times in Tbilisi squares. The prominent sign above our windscreen aroused a strong curiosity among the crowds that gathered round. The question “Otkuda?” (“Where are they from?”) could be heard from many people to whom “Kembridzh” meant nothing. Eventually I gave a short explanation in Russian that we were students from Cambridge University in England and were taking a holiday by car in the Soviet Union. This led to other questions, a few delivered in English. Before long, all five of us were busy trying to answer them. Jonathan Steele, who knew some Russian and had also spent hard time in the car immersed in *Teach Yourself Georgian*, profoundly impressed many people with his Georgian.

The Georgian language is unique, possessing its own alphabet and no known connections to any other language, except possibly Basque. The reasons for this are many, and relate to the country’s history. The first Georgian dynasty is thought to have appeared in about 300 BCE, with its capital at Mtskheta. But the most important and definite development came in the fourth century CE, when Greek missionaries arrived and converted the people to Christianity. The Georgian Orthodox Church was subsequently autocephalous from the fifth century until early in the nineteenth, soon after the Russian empire had conquered the country and taken away the autocephaly.

Meanwhile, Georgia had been assailed from the fourth to the seventh centuries by Persian Sassanians from the east and the Byzantines from the west. Then it had undergone Muslim rule from the seventh to the tenth centuries, before enjoying its most glorious period—two hundred years of union under a Georgian dynasty. The language, religion, and culture blossomed, the capital moved to Tbilisi, and a Georgian empire was established.

From 1220 to 1400, however, the Mongols savagely destroyed the country and maintained control by force. The Georgians, though helped by their language and religion, could not quickly recover from the Mongol devastation. Moreover, from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries they were harassed and often lost land or sovereignty to the constantly warring Ottomans to the west and the Persian Safavids to the east.

In 1783, Catherine the Great's Russian armies descended, and independence was lost until 1990. One brief respite came in the exciting three years 1918 to 1921, while the Russians fought a long and violent civil war.

Since the Soviet collapse in 1990–91, Georgia has reestablished full independence, and foreign tourists, attracted by the magnificent Caucasus mountain ranges and Georgian hospitality, are arriving in ever-greater numbers. However, the country has lost two provinces, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in effect to the Russians, who fought a five-day war against Georgia in 2008.

It is hard to see how a people of 2 million or 3 million (today 4 million) could have survived all this battering and foreign occupation if it had not had its own unique language and its own church. Today these cultural assets make the country strong, even though it has few raw materials (manganese and coal mainly), its economy is weak, and many of its people are poor. Clearly its future depends heavily on Russia's intentions and economic power, and on the West's uncertain level of interest in defending the small country.

From sunny Tbilisi we followed the one road north over the Caucasus directly into Russia, pounded now by unforgiving, tempestuous rain. This route took us via the Krestovyi Pass, at 7,800 feet the lowest of the three passes that allow passage over the Caucasus Mountains. In a few places the rain had washed away the asphalt completely and we were glad to be in a Land Rover, which could cope with hazardous conditions and an appalling road. When we stopped, we were greeted by tribesmen who mostly spoke no Russian, so Jonathan's Georgian, though basic, came in handy. Wildly bearded and dressed in thick coats that kept out the rain, they were happy to see us and were intrigued by the sign mounted above our windscreen.

#### KIEV, LVOV, AND UZHGOROD

Once we came down to a normal height above sea level, we had a long slog north, then made a ninety-degree turn to the west, and with persistence made it to the Kiev campsite. Kiev, on the mighty Dnieper River, became an organized town in the tenth century, not long before two Greek monks, Cyril and Methodius, arrived to convert the emerging nation known as Kievan Rus' to Christianity. Prince Vladimir, the prince of Novgorod who ruled Kievan Rus' from 980 to 1015, was converted in 988. Originally a

practitioner of Slavic paganism, he chose Christianity from several religions that he considered.

Like the other towns of Kievan Rus' except for Novgorod, Kiev was first cruelly sacked by the Mongols in the early thirteenth century, and then had to pay them regular tribute. In 1961 Kiev was a large city and the capital of the USSR's Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. We spent two days in early August seeing the sights, and on Sunday I attended a service in the Orthodox cathedral, built in about the fifteenth century and one of the few churches that the Communist regime allowed to remain open. It was a moving occasion with a large congregation—which did not surprise me. Even though I was fully aware of the Soviet regime's openly expressed determination to eliminate religion completely, I believed that human nature would make this impossible.

When the service ended I had no difficulty in finding a charming young woman who was grateful to receive from me, unobtrusively, two small-format bibles in Russian that a friend had given me for distribution. She recounted how she and a single co-believer were often subjected to severe hostility for their steadfast refusal to renounce their faith. My motivation was primarily to help out good people in the USSR whom the regime deprived of necessities, in this case religious ones. My own faith at this time was not strong, but was strengthened whenever I attended a Russian service. Then I felt uplifted by the Christians' dignified resistance to oppression.

On our last evening in Kiev we decided to dispose of a large chunk of our store of rubles by having dinner in a good restaurant. Afterward we were feeling cheerful from the wine and decided, stupidly, to provoke the man who was following us by splitting into two groups and going in different directions. I saw him rush into a phone booth to tell his boss what was happening and, no doubt, ask for help. But it was too late. Both groups escaped official surveillance and enjoyed feeling that much freer for what remained of the evening.

The next day we made our way west to Lvov, where we briefly enjoyed the imposing cathedral and the other beautiful remains of the old city, much of which had been destroyed by the Germans in the Second World War. It had been ruled at different times by the Poles, the Lithuanians, and the Germans. The KGB kept a tight watch on us, perhaps because of our trickery in Kiev, perhaps because Lvov was one of the most Western-oriented cities in the Soviet Union and thus likely to be especially friendly

to Westerners, as indeed it was, and hence would attract more than the normal number of Westerners to be closely observed.

But we had to press on to the Soviet border beyond Uzhgorod, which was where the KGB really took its revenge. While a Russian group returning from abroad jumped from their cars, some of whom kissed the Motherland's soil, we were confronted by armed officials. They took the Land Rover away with them, emptied it of all of our belongings, and drove it over a deep pit to inspect it for any Russians who might be clinging to its chassis. We were taken one by one into a small room and in some cases made to strip (by chance I escaped this); then our bags were examined in excruciating detail and anything suspicious was confiscated. Our films were either developed and printed or confiscated, and we were not allowed to depart until many hours had passed and we had developed visions of perhaps being thrown into prison. We were then told to get out of the Soviet Union and never to return.

Only when we got home did I realize that an album of photos of my family, showing typical English family life, had not been returned to me. Naively I wrote to the customs office in Uzhgorod, explaining what had happened, and asking for the album, when located, to be mailed to me. Rather promptly, I received a polite but doubtless mendacious reply to the effect that a careful search had been conducted, but the album had not been found.

When we arrived in Vienna late that night we learned that the Berlin Wall had started to go up the previous day. That tightened the screws of East-West tension a few more notches.

From there we hurried on to the place in Austria where Duncan and I would learn where we should go in order to begin the work we had contracted to do for a rich Italian family. We were to teach the three young children English and Latin, and generally look after them in the absence of their parents. It turned out that our goal was to go to the family's home in the Dolomite mountains—an imposing, ancient castle, to which our friends kindly delivered us

The 1960 visit had laid valuable groundwork for the second one, so that I had been able to learn a lot more on this absorbing, exciting, and instructive second trip. We had all of our time to ourselves, and could pursue a wide range of activities of our own choosing. Thus we became knowledgeable about Russians, Georgians, and Ukrainians and their countries. Two interpreters—Jonathan and I—for three others was a lot better than my

being one for a score of travelers, as in 1960. We were also lucky not to experience any serious mishaps, and not to develop any major frictions in our own ranks.

On our return to England, we all plunged into our final year of undergraduate studies. The outcome for me in June 1962 was—in a grading system of four degree classes—a class 2, upper division. Jonathan was the only one of us to get a highly valued and well-deserved class 1.

Influenced by my trips to the Soviet Union, I found myself in this last year concentrating increasingly on Russian language and history, and decreasingly on literature. At the same time, I felt frustrated that Cambridge taught Russian and Soviet Russian history only up to 1941. This didn't give me enough background to understand the USSR that I had experienced at first hand in 1960 and 1961. During the next academic year, I started to fill in that background, and also began to launch my public writing career with three fairly solid articles for serious student magazines, one of them called "How Socialist Is the Soviet Union?" By my definition of socialism, the answer was "Not very much."