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SUNDAY / The News and Courier
THE EVENING POST

PARADE

Norman Mailer In Russia

Another View



See Mailer and
others in Moscow's
Red Square

An American in Russia examines what separates us and them

A COUNTRY, —NOT A— SCENARIO

HAVING BEEN IN Russia recently for 15 days, I try to remember that I have spent my life deciding what I think about my own country. It is an uncommon day when I don't brood over whether America is better or worse than I believe it to be.

How then can I offer any perceptions of the USSR? I went there in the category of individual tourist. I had no guide and did not speak the language.

Obviously, I only offer modest conclusions. If, however, I thought they had no value, I would remain silent. Instead I tell myself that a child can have a good sense of the true emotions in the air when he enters a room full of adults. I can certify that going around Moscow and Leningrad and parts of Lithuania with about 100 words of Russian is next thing to being a child.

I say "100 words of Russian." It is an exaggeration. For two weeks, before I left New York, I studied by myself, but once I was there, I could only remember the wrong words. Ordering a meal, my vocabulary would bring up the terms for laundry. That has to carry you back to the year when you are learning to talk. New connections keep twisting your thoughts. In Russian, the word for "brave" sounds an awful lot like "smelly."

What a distance between Americans and Russians! You think about it all the time. In America, we tend to treat strangers as friends. Our first impulse is to say "yes." We feel more comfortable if we can call a man by his first name soon after we are introduced. Whereas, with Russians, it seems safe to say that only if you persist, do they begin to listen carefully. Should the Russian decide to



Young boy at Moscow day-care center: "I haven't gotten what I wanted," says a generation of Russians, willing to die in harness, "but maybe my kids will."

BY NORMAN MAILER

agree, then you may be quickly promoted to family. It can prove a rude and emotional family. Russians address people they do not know with intimacy—they scold total strangers. On the other hand, their personal warmth is startling. The sudden love (I do not mean carnal love) that gleams in a Russian's eyes can be as warm and nourishing as marrow: to be accepted is to be treated with all the loving, jeering familiarity of family. One night in Leningrad, having dinner with a Russian friend who spoke English, I watched a middle-aged woman with glasses come up to me. She said in Russian (it was translated), "You do nothing tonight but feed your face. Why don't you dance with me?" On the floor, she moved stiffly like a good Soviet citizen. Still, we progressed a little over the length of two dances. Then she gave an embarrassed smile, and took off.

Yes, the perception of oneself as an American stays alive every hour of the day. It is as if you take on something of our presence as a nation. This sounds absurd, but you begin to feel a little responsible for our policy toward Russia. You walk the streets of Moscow thinking: Is the Soviet Union as we have painted it, or have we painted ourselves into a corner? After 40 years of reading newspaper accounts about Russia, the trouble is that the country is not quite the way one expected it to be. On the other hand, it is not wholly different. In this small gap, however, sits a large question.

Let me offer something we can understand. In Leningrad, at the Hotel Leningrad, a modern high-rise hotel not too unlike a high-rise Holiday Inn in such a place as Norman, Okla., breakfast was

served cafeteria-style. You put hot cereal in a bowl and small sausages on your plate, plus pancakes, sweet rolls, and tea. If you wanted more, you could add salami, cheese, yogurt, hard-boiled eggs, some kind of rice dish, pickled cabbage, plus a couple of other items I have forgotten. The price was standard—one ruble, 20 kopeks—about \$1.50 at the official Soviet rate of exchange when I was there. The buffet dinner (4 rubles, or \$5) came with soup, appetizer, a



Burnett Collection

In Moscow market: Many women wait hours on line to do daily shopping.

Ah, those faces, worked by life... all with the same expression

roast, vegetables, and dessert.

On the other hand, one orange cost 2 rubles at a fruit stand. One is supping at the table of a curious economy.

Other contrasts were soon discovered. The headwaiter steered you to a table with strangers. The Soviet logic seemed to be that solitary diners use up too many tablecloths. Also, they tend to be full of gloom. On the other hand, long-married couples often have little to say to one another. So, put the solitaires and the married couples together. It can't make it any more gloomy, and it certainly saves tablecloths. Our American logic: Damn it, I'm alone, and I feel like eating alone—I'll pay a cover charge for the extra tablecloth—falls on ears that cannot hear. You are in a land where all, more or less, make do for all. If the hotel towels are rough on the skin, and the sheets on your bed feel no better

than the towels, well, everyday needs cost little. Bread is almost free. Subway rides are less than 7 cents. Rent for a modest two-room apartment in a modern building (when your name, after years of waiting, finally comes to the head of the list) will be less than 15 rubles a month. Income tax is 13 percent. Higher education is free. Indeed college students are paid a stipend. Medical care is free. Of course, if you want a doctor who is much in demand and do not wish to wait two years for an appointment, you must have common acquaintances, or be able to offer a sumptuous gift, or both. Side by side with the inexpensive working economy is a secondary network of bribes, corruption, contacts, clout, and friends.

All the same, virtually everyone in the Soviet Union lives to some degree by the rules of the public economy, and their incomes and wage scales, by our standards, are odd in the extreme. For instance, a private in the Russian army is given about \$6 a month as compared to American privates, who get \$573 a month to start. Getting out of the army in Russia and going back to civilian life is like returning to a free economy.

With not too many exceptions, any male or female who is physically able and wants work has a job. The lowest pay, as any guide will inform you, goes to the old ladies who sweep the streets with brooms made of birch twigs. They receive 84 rubles a month. Yet doctors, teachers and lawyers receive no more from the government than 200 rubles a month. Workers in heavy-duty high-risk industry, 500 rubles. If two or three coal miners live in the same family, they can, after waiting half a decade for their turn, buy a small car for 10,000 rubles or more. All the same, there are more cars on the street than one anticipated.

Managers of factories make as much as 1000 rubles a month but often work 70 and 80 hour weeks. Even when they live well, they live modestly. Those notorious dachas we have read about that the Soviet bureaucracy goes to for weekends in the countryside are comparable for the most part to wooden cottages in Maine. Often the studs remain uncovered in the walls. Even the President and General Secretary of the Communist Party, Chernenko, as well as Andropov and Brezhnev before him, has each in his turn occupied the same apartment in Moscow. You can see it as you walk by on the street. You are looking at an apartment house put up probably before World War I. The edifice looks as shabby as any other on this avenue. One could be strolling past any row of large heavy old apartment houses on Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn, or Grand Concourse in the Bronx. Inside, it is rumored, the General Secretary has a duplex, and it is lavishly furnished, but from the street, every propriety that speaks of the equality of life in the

Soviet Union is kept up. There will be no great and obvious differences of wealth to look upon. In Moscow, only one class is to be seen, and that is the middle class. The spectrum runs—by the measure of American eyes—from the lower middle class to a seedy, medium middle class. Nowhere does one encounter rich suburbs or slums.

Now, in private, other worlds will, of course, be found. The family of any plant manager making 1000 rubles a month doubtless has a good car, and if he is high enough in the hierarchy, he will have a chauffeur and enjoy other servants paid for by the state. His family will have access to special shops with luxury items and fine foods. The wives of such men are able to save many hundreds of hours a year by not having to wait on line to do their daily shopping. If this much knowledge of the Soviet Union had been acquired before I even went on my trip, it was fascinating all the same to see how much care is paid to concealing most of the evidence of inequality. One's possessions are simply not to be flaunted. The force of social hypocrisy is as intense on this point as the concealment, let us say, of sexual practices in small towns in the American Southwest. On Saturday night,

the kids may be finding out a lot about each other in the backseats of automobiles, but one's town reputation is kept in reasonable maintenance by regular attendance Sunday at church. So it goes with the appearance of modest living in the USSR.

There are other small shocks to one's expectations. One has heard so much of Soviet lacks that one is prepared to greet a giant but wounded dinosaur. Instead, the country is not without a certain visible substance. Passing through the flat farmlands of Lithuania between the cities of Vilnius and Kaunas, one could be in Iowa. Already, in early spring, winter wheat is showing its first green, the silos rise frequently, and bizarre modern villages show concrete apartment houses on the plain that rise 10 or 15 stories. They are just as white, rectangular, cheap and ugly as their counterparts in America and, for that matter, all over the world. Trucks grind by at a great rate. Television transmission towers go up every 20 or 30 miles to spike the sky. The beautiful land is pocked by ugly sights—just as in America. Some of the newer factories have the same ongoing windowless walls that numb our American senses—just that little bit—as we pass them on our own highways. The world is getting uglier everywhere, and the newer parts of the USSR and America have the same flat prosperous nerve-deadening look. In America, so much

of this new architecture looks humanly repellent, looks totalitarian. So does it look totalitarian in Russia as well. Of course, the Russians at least have justification: They were desperate for cheap housing after the vast depredations of World War II. They have been doing their best ever since to catch up. So their architectural monstrosities, while quite as ugly as ours, seem, all the same, a touch less offensive. Nonetheless, those panoramas of 15-story egg crates are as stupefying as a bruise on a bruise. Forget America and the Soviet Union. The mood of our world is being insulted equally from Calcutta to Vancouver.

But I avoid the near issue. For us, modern Russian architecture seems hardly the problem. Not yet. We worry instead about how much of a police state is the USSR. No other question is asked as often when you return. Yet how are you going to measure that? Talking to a seminar of journalists a couple of weeks after I came back, we all agreed that to the extent we invest in a particular scenario, we can always find the ongoing evidence to keep living with it. Decide that the Soviet Union is an evil force bent on war, aggrandizement and the totalitarian control of all humankind.

continued



Wright/Breese Collection

A student in Kazan: Russians can prove to be an emotional family; their personal warmth is startling.

It is a real country where people suffer and scheme, look for ways to live well, and even play ball like thee and me

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A COUNTRY /continued

and you will keep perceiving the country as such. But then, one difficulty with being a steady correspondent in Moscow is that your apartment will, of course, be bugged. The journalist lives in a ghetto with other journalists. The Soviets monitor his moves. How could he fail to be sensitive then to every nuance of a police state?

Yet, take an opposite scenario. Conceive of being the son of a high Soviet official stationed at the UN in New York. The boy likes to walk around the city. The father is full of Soviet horror tales about the streets of America. His fears are augmented by the knowledge that his apartment is bugged by American security forces. He is inclined to lecture the son at length about America's imperial desire for international conflict. "Look at all the evidence you find of that," he says, "in the violence on the streets." The son, however, tries to say, "The Americans I see on the streets don't seem to want war. I don't think they'll ever go to war happily here." And, of course, we know that the boy is right. The father is wrong. Americans do not have an imperial desire for international conflict. To the degree that one is unencumbered by a false scenario, one can see in a day what others will not perceive in 10 years. That is not superior perception nor intellect. It is simply the good fortune to have one's eyes saved from the tunnel vision of a scenario.

On the other hand, huge and powerful forces in America and the USSR are at work to keep old scenarios alive. A good many powerful people in both countries depend on keeping the relations between these two superpowers at the same ongoing abominable level. How much power will they lose if the people of both countries cease believing that the other nation is an evil force?

Let me tell you what I think. It is with true hesitation. Still, when friends ask me, "How big a police state do they have over there?" I respond, "Somewhat less than I thought."

Now, of course, I can hardly speak of the highest levels of Soviet life. All the same, it is safe, doubtless, to assume that the higher one rises in the bureaucracy or the Party and the more sensitive is one's work, the more complete will be the surveillance by the KGB. There is a large difference, however, between subtle and not so subtle methods of terror applied at the top, and the assumption that this is also true for all levels of society.

"Weren't you followed when you left your hotel?" people would ask after I came back to New York.

"No."

"Are you certain?"

"Well," I would answer, "I can't be certain. I just don't think so."

That must be a fair reply. There is a feeling to be followed: One has a sense of privacy or the lack of it—on the street and on one's telephone. "Every day," I answered my friends, "I would leave the hotel and walk around for miles. I would turn down streets and if they proved less interesting than I hoped, I would go back on my steps. I would walk into interesting courtyards and come out of them. My rambles were so purposeless that anyone assigned to follow me would have had a breakdown trying to figure out what I was up to."

"You're saying you could walk anywhere?"

"Yes. At least wherever I was—yes."

"You weren't scared?"

"Well, you don't feel much tension exploring those streets." And, to make a point, I would add, "Let me tell you my Leningrad story."

One night, I would explain, after going to the theater, I decided to walk back to my hotel. It was something more than two miles, but I wanted to see the canals of Leningrad at night. All went well until somewhere in the middle of this promenade, I had to pass through a park. It was perhaps a third of a mile in length and a few hundred yards in width, and it seemed deserted. Around a turn, however, I came on a sight that gave me a start. In the dark, perhaps a hundred yards off, someone was sitting on a bench. As I came nearer, I realized it was not one but two persons, and they had some large indefinable object between them. I was longing to take a detour, but there is a magnetism to the logic of these matters, so I kept walking. Then, I came nearer still, and saw a man and a woman on that bench with a baby carriage between them. Probably they were living in an overcrowded apartment and had come out to this park to put the baby to sleep.

"Then you're saying that there is little violence on the streets?"

"There's certainly not much in the air. Maybe all those people in America who keep screaming that we need safe streets ought to consider moving over to the Soviet Union. It's a very conservative place."

"You liked it?"

"I won't go that far. It's a sad place. I felt as if I were back on the Lower East Side of New York 100 years ago. I could have been watching my grandparents walking by."

Ah, those Moscow faces, bundled up against the last ravages of winter. Have you ever walked through the poor streets of Chicago on West Division Street (where almost everybody who goes by is Ukrainian or Polish)? Hardworking features surround you, full of worry, doubt, long-congealed anger, much concern for family, much dread at what life will bring next. The same faces were here, a generation willing to die in harness in order that their children have a little more. You could see this determination often in Russia: "I haven't gotten what I wanted," says the expression, "but maybe my kids will." It is moving. One feels sad. All these faces, worked by life, all the weather of each personal history carved into each nose and mouth. Since everyone who is of the same age has been churned through the same historical cataclysms, so to a degree did all these middle-aged and older Russians on the streets have the same expression—such an array of plain, hardworked faces—yes, life had come to them with a rock in each fist. These older Russians going by were as battered in their collective looks as old club fighters renowned for the dubious ability to take a tremendous punch. How many had been landed on each marked-up mug? The faces in American crowds are better-looking, but by comparison, innocent or smug.

It kept one thinking of what it meant to live in Russia over the last 70 years. Twenty million people were killed in the First World War and in the Bolshevik revolution and civil war that followed it. As many as 10 million may have perished in the early Thirties in the famines that fol-

lowed the enforced collectivization of the farms under Stalin, and more than 20 million were slain by the Germans. Eight to 10 million died in the forced labor camps under Stalin. Then Khrushchev, coming to power after Stalin's death, eventually made public to the people of the USSR that Stalin had been not only a legend but a monster. Since the average Russian, reading his highly controlled press, had the reflex by now of believing that Stalin was an infallible leader, the shock was equal, let us say, to Americans being told that Dwight D. Eisenhower was a mass murderer of children.

Psychologically, the Russians never recovered. That is comprehensible. On a smaller scale, we have never been the same since the assassinations of JFK, Martin Luther King, and Bobby Kennedy. Of course, Khrushchev was soon deposed. The bearer of such ill tidings could hardly rule for long. By the late Sixties, after more than 50 years of slaughter, terror, and historic shock, of cumulative catastrophe where on average more than a million Soviet citizens were killed in war or perished in camps and prisons each year, the USSR now began to live with Brezhnev through two decades of sluggish, stagnant progress. Terror diminished, and rebuilding advanced to some degree. By huge emphasis on an armaments economy and a relative indifference to consumer goods, nuclear parity with the West was brought much closer. By now, however, the ideals of the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 had died ten times over. A vast social machine was still functioning, but the power of corruption had also swollen. The USSR was in metamorphosis from a stern, war-rationed economy, bulwarked by prodigious terror, to an immense welfare state drowning in cynicism, bribery, waste, shoddy products, and oppression.

"Why, then, do you say it's not a police state? It's still oppressive."

"Yes, but not nearly to the degree it used to be."

I thought of a dissident I had talked to. His face twisted with aristocratic contempt every time I asked about anyone who worked high in the Soviet establishment.

"What of the terror?" I asked.

The dissident shrugged. "Years ago, the secret police would come in the middle of the night. Nobody ever heard of you again. Now you're arrested and have a trial. You go to a camp, or you're exiled."

"Are the arrests frequent?"

"No. For every 20 they used to seize, now maybe they take one. The other 19 are left to worry."

One could hear the same all over. The situation was not good, in fact it was considerably worse than it had been just a few years ago, but, on the other hand, it was vastly improved from the time of Stalin. In those years, tens of

continued

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"Vitamin Side Effects Revealed!"

An Interview with Frank K. Wood, President, F C & A

(Atlanta, GA) —

FC&A, a nearby Peachtree City, GA, company announced today the release of a new \$5.99 book, "Vitamin Side Effects Revealed".

It reveals surprising side effects and other secrets about vitamins . . . facts that aren't generally known by the public. Read on through this interview with FC&A President, Frank K. Wood.

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Question: What other vitamin secrets are revealed in this new book?

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- ▶ Not one but two vitamins which can help fight hardening of the arteries, and coronary heart disease.
- ▶ Two minerals that help protect against cancer.
- ▶ A vitamin that helps protect against schizophrenia.
- ▶ Two minerals and a vitamin that can combat osteoporosis, which causes the collapse of the backbone in older women.
- ▶ Two minerals that can help lower high blood pressure.

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A COUNTRY/continued

millions had been arrested by his orders. Now one measured the political prisoners by the thousands. Helsinki Watch, which is not sympathetic to the USSR, gives as its best guess—estimate that over the past 15 years there have been 5000 political arrests and that the number of dissidents who are in prison this year might be 1000 individuals. Another estimate puts it at 10,000 prisoners. These are not happy figures but, in proportion to the Soviet Union's population, 270 million, we must recognize that one is speaking of a ratio of a single political prisoner for every 270,000 Soviet citizens, or, taking the highest estimate, one in every 27,000. (See box on page 9.)

Sitting at a table in a Russian's home, discussing the regime, there is often a silence after a remark has been too critical. Someone will point to the ceiling as if to say, "They are listening." Of course, given the number of houses in which such conversations take place, the odds are considerable that this particular room is not being monitored at the moment. Maybe the KGB placed a working microphone here once, maybe they will put one in again, next month or next year, but the finger does not point to the ceiling in abject fear so much as with a wry, almost mocking respect. It underlines the sensibility of one's childhood: God is listening to my thoughts. Yet, as one soon learns, He does not strike for too little. Of course, it can take years before one gets brave enough to think: Maybe He is not listening at all. How, indeed, is one to know?

There is even a story so apocryphal that one hopes it is true. Dissidents tell it as a talisman. The dear friend—let us call him Glabikov—of a famous poetess was arrested for some minor act of dissidence. The poetess, in response to an old Russian tradition that esteemed artists have the right to petition the czar, now sent a letter to Andropov. At its conclusion she wrote, "If you do not release Glabikov, I do not know what I will do."

No answer came from the General Secretary. "Andropov is a gross man for not replying to me," said the poetess to her friends.

Then, one day, the KGB asked her to visit. One can picture the faces she encountered. In America, one can see the same faces on trade union leaders, corporate executives, Mafia godfathers, some Congressmen and—take a look—a couple of our President's close advisers.

If it helps the tale, you may also believe that the poetess was a beautiful woman, for indeed she was. Her voice was deep and sweet and mysterious and full of the awe that a good voice brings to the deep-rooted music of words.

"All right," said the KGB officer, "what is this last line in your letter? Why do you say that you do not know what you will do? What does this mean?"

"It means," said the poetess, "that I do not know what I will do if Glabikov

is not released."

"No, what are you saying? Do you imply that you will commit suicide? Or that you will defect? Are you going to denounce us? What sort of scandal do you propose?"

"I mean," she repeated in lugubrious tones firm in their wonder at her own uncharted depths. "I mean that if you do not release Glabikov, I simply do not know what I will do."

Legend has it that Glabikov was released. How splendid if the story is true!

Of course, it is equal to a scenario. I offer it as a countercenario to the other scenarios. Facets to contrast with other facets. It may be the only way to offer a portrait of Russia that is without scenario, to give, that is, a sketch of a huge and complex beast of a nation, a land difficult to live in, abrasive as steel wool, messed-up, by parts horrendous, but nonetheless a real country where people do not necessarily decide in advance that they are working for a doomed and evil machine, but instead grow up suffering and scheming, looking for better ways and means to live well and fornicate well, and even go bowling and play ball like thee and me.

Maybe, we are coming closer to the idea of what I wish to say. In Lithuania, in the city of Vilnius, I happened to wander into a Roman Catholic church around twilight. Mass was being celebrated, and the church was filled to capacity with old women, a few men, a few adolescents. The service was fervid. It was also beautiful. Beauty takes on the power of addiction in the gray anti-sensuous climate of March in the Soviet—indeed, pure beauty begins to feel as necessary as food. I do not know if I ever attended a Catholic service that was more intense. The point, however, is that my entrance into the church was casual, and the exit as easy. I was alone, and no policemen were outside, at least none that I could see. My own good simple tourist's reaction: "Holy cow, it's not that big a deal here anymore to go to church."

A trickier example. It may reveal more. An American who was born in Lithuania went back to visit her relatives, and they, bringing food, drove in to greet her at the hotel in Vilnius. They wanted her to come back to their village, 50 kilometers away. It's forbidden, don't you understand? she told them.

No, it's okay, they said. You can come with us.

As it turned out, the woman was right. It was an exceptional case, and her relatives had no understanding of exceptional cases. So soon as they started to drive her around town, they were followed by another car. This was startling to her relatives. They were farm people. Something like this had never happened before—to them.

If you were visited in your home in America by a relative who happened to be a Soviet official, your phone might be tapped by the FBI. If you discovered it, that would be unique to your experi-

ESTIMATES ON POLITICAL PRISONERS

Country†	Population	Prisoners
Turkey	46,312,000	13,000*
Uruguay	2,947,000	800
Cuba	9,706,000	1250**
El Salvador	4,813,000	400
Nicaragua	2,824,000	300
Argentina+	28,438,000	1000***
USSR	270,000,000	1000***

Source: U.S. Helsinki Watch Committee

†Listed in order of ratio between political prisoners and total population

*Estimates reach 20,000

**250 long-term plus 1000 serving short terms

+Before Falklands (1981)

***One estimate goes as high as 10,000

ence. Of course, there is a difference between a visit by an average American tourist to her hometown in Lithuania and a Soviet on official business here, and in that separation may be measured the gap in the freedoms of the two countries. But my point is that these country people in Lithuania were less afraid of the authorities than was their visitor. They had not been living with our image of them. In fact, in this case, the American woman was right and the natives were wrong, but whatever else, her relatives were obviously not dwelling in prodigious daily fear.

Of course, Russia, by any measure, is a harsh country, so let me end with a harsh thought. It is sad but true that our American leaders accept fascism in other countries and do business with it. Our leaders can understand it. Fascism is an undemocratic form of government led by the rich and the military. Communism, however, terrifies the American system. After all, it is the tyranny of the poor when society breaks up altogether. So in America we are encouraged to abhor it in every form. We live with the scenario that Russia is an evil force. Now, the world is on the edge of destroying itself. Can we afford abhorrence any longer? It is significant that we have forgiven Nazi Germany for its concentration camps—and the 20 million people that the Nazis exterminated—we do great business with Germany—but we still do not exculpate the Russians for their gulags. We talk as if the slave labor camps are as hideous today as 30 or 40 years ago, and that, at least—let us look to thank the Lord for the real blessings—is not true any longer.

We are a great nation. Can we take the step of assuming that we will be greater yet as we come to live with some more generous understanding of all our possibilities? Our world may be the most beautiful of all the planets, but the state of our international relations is more barren than the craters of the moon. [E]

Norman Mailer's latest novel, "Tough Guys Don't Dance," is being published this month by Random House.

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