

# The USSR

by Michael Warder

I can't remember the last time I was in an airport waiting for luggage along with a flight from Managua. Welcome to Sheremetyevo Airport, Moscow. The passport control soldier was in a glass-enclosed booth with a large shoulder-high shelf that hid his checklists. He could look at the calibrations painted on his window to check my height against what was printed in the passport. A mirror behind and above me gave the soldier an opportunity to inspect my backside and the height of my shoe heels. Customs was much easier. The official simply waved me through when my bags went through an x-ray machine. Still, an x-ray machine *after* the plane ride is an unusual debarkation procedure.

The purpose of our tour was to visit religious sites significant to the "millennium of Christianity." Nineteen-eighty-eight was one thousand years after Prince Vladimir of ancient Kiev required his subjects to be baptized in the Dnieper River. Before the trip I had made up my mind that every possible chance I would go off on my own to see more directly the peoples of the Soviet Union. Part of my planning was limited by the fact that the Soviets did not issue the visa until five days before the trip—standard practice. In addition, there was no information about which hotels we would be staying at in Moscow, Leningrad, and Kiev. This, too, is standard practice and has been so for many years now. Even after we arrived in the Soviet Union, we could not learn in advance of our arrival in a certain city as to where we would stay. *Glasnost* has not really changed the basics of travel to the Soviet Union.

Whatever the word *glasnost* means, it is not freedom of speech or press. A more accurate definition is freedom to criticize Brezhnev, Stalin, or any evil that can be blamed on them. I saw an excellent example of *glasnost* one night when, instead of going to an optional circus event in Leningrad, I went off on my own and happened upon a movie playing on Nevsky Prospect called *Assa*.

In one scene a government stooge watches a television program in which former Soviet leader Brezhnev is getting a medal. The rather youthful audience hooted, clapped, and cheered in mock appreciation of this overdecorated five-star marshal of the Soviet Union who received more medals than could fit onto a full-length coat.

*Assa* also conveyed a veiled warning to other abusers of government power. A middle-aged security official, jealous

of his younger lover's friendship with a rock singer, arranges for the murder of the young man. The young woman, in turn, kills the official.

On another evening, I declined the ballet and went to another movie, *Mirror of Heroism*, which I had seen advertised extensively on billboards. This movie was a bit more difficult to follow, but it dealt with the era of Stalin and the subsequent problems of understanding between the generations. It mocked a Stalinist factory leader and a policeman, both of whom were caught up in their own self-importance and who lacked any capability to think critically about their public duties. It also showed the suffering of the people who labored to make their quotas in the coal mines, and the "heroic" efforts to industrialize.

I was surprised at the freedom of expression in these movies. Both seemed to be saying that there is a new generation and the old ways won't wash. On the other hand, it does get tedious to associate everything bad in the Soviet Union with Brezhnev (dead 6 years) and Stalin (dead for 35). Brezhnev appointees, clinging to past policies to maintain their privileges, still abound, and undoubtedly they and closet Stalinists are the real targets of these movies. The effort Gorbachev is making to purge these old appointees is part of his plan to consolidate his own power.

I had not expected to see party slogans on buildings in the Soviet Union, since I had read that the signs had been taken down as a matter of good taste. In Moscow I saw only a few such signs, but in Leningrad and Kiev party signs and slogans were plentiful. "Long Live Leninism!," "Glory to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union!," the ever-popular "Workers of the World, Unite!," and the like were on top of many major buildings. Perhaps in Leningrad and Kiev the local party bosses feel that they have to try harder. I saw no slogans on billboards that championed *perestroika*, *glasnost*, or *democratzia*. One local said that the building signs conveyed the older slogans because it was rather costly to change them, and that the newer slogans could be seen, though I never did.

There are many things that Moscow, Leningrad, and Kiev have in common. Each of their respective metro systems is named after Lenin, and each of these cities has a supersaturation of pictures, statues, lapel pins, memorial squares and parks, museums, libraries, and books of Lenin. In fact, a good working definition of a Soviet kiosk is a place that sells Lenin's works and other things, too. There is no criticism of Lenin these days in the Soviet Union, and the guard is ever-vigilant in front of his mummified remains in

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his mausoleum in Red Square. Nor did I see or hear of any criticism of Gorbachev.

I visited the building of *Moscow Pravda* near Pushkin Square one afternoon. On the windows were posters that reflected the Gorbachev line on *glasnost*. There were posters mocking Brezhnev's medals, the paper shortages, the poor quality of consumer goods, and the privileges of the party bosses. When Boris Yeltsin led the party in Moscow, the *Moscow Pravda* reflected his leadership style and priorities. At that time the paper became a very aggressive advocate for speeding up political and economic change. With Yeltsin's ouster in October 1987, the newspaper toned itself down.

I had believed that in this era of *glasnost* Westerners could get European newspapers or European editions of American newspapers at the major hotels. Not so. After four full days I saw my first American newspaper at a kiosk. The problem with the edition of the *People's Daily World* was that it was three weeks out of date and had very little news. It is true that I did obtain two issues of *Moscow News* at our hotels. The difficulty with this publication is that it really does not contain news, either; just loads of sophisticated propaganda that is all the more effective because it is flanked by elements of truth. But to be fair, *Moscow News* has a degree of criticism of the Soviet Union that is sometimes surprising. The Soviet citizens do not have access to it.

One man I met while out for a walk was a journalist with one of the Soviet industrial publications. He was critical of Stalin and Brezhnev and clearly welcomed the changes brought about by Gorbachev. He was sympathetic to Boris Yeltsin and rather bitter about the disadvantages his children had compared to the privileges of the children of the party elite. He was religious, although he did not regularly attend church, and he enjoyed reciting poetry from memory. But just as I was feeling that this fellow was quite friendly to my notions of freedom and democracy, he explained how he thought the party had to return to the original ideas of Lenin. *Glasnost* has real limits in the Soviet Union, and we in the West should take care not to confuse it with our ideas of freedom.

The Arbat is impressive. It is a stretch of about ten blocks on the West side of Moscow that is a beehive of artists, singers, sidewalk "businessmen," and even a protester here and there. I visited it several evenings and saw approximately ten thousand people there each time. There were perhaps a hundred artists doing portraits, that many again simply displaying their wares, and clusters of fifty to two hundred gathered around singers who sang of social and political change.

One night I went there at about 10:30 p.m. and found it rather dark and deserted. Later someone told me that at a certain time the street lights are turned off and everyone departs. There is an understanding that in that place during certain hours people may blow off social steam and the authorities will look the other way—or at least record their information discreetly. I took a picture one night of a particularly good singer (he was in the tradition of the underground folk hero Visotsky), and quite a few heads turned when the flash went off.

I had heard that Gorky Park was going to be developed

into the official equivalent of Hyde Park in London. It was to be a duty-free zone of public opinion and was to replace the Arbat. I visited the park one afternoon on my own to see. As you enter the park you can hear heroic music blaring, and I was surprised to see several skateboarders weaving around pedestrians. I found the place where people can spout off and listened to an old Bolshevik arrayed in medals speak in a way that Marx and Lenin would have enjoyed. Perhaps equal time is going to be given for a Western democratic perspective, but I doubt it. For now the Arbat is where the action is.

Money can be rather confusing in the Soviet Union. When you enter the country you have to detail exactly how much money you bring in and in what currencies. Any changing of currencies has to be documented as you go along and receipt for purchases should be saved. Why? The Soviet government wants your money and does not want it to go to the Soviet private sector.

At every Intourist hotel, there is a little *berioshka* shop that sells fur hats, books, booze, cigarettes, native dolls, etc. only for foreign currencies. The quality is good and the prices are better than what you find at a store for the Soviet citizens that deals in rubles. Why? The Soviet government wants your currency, so that it can buy what it wants on the international market. Even the bars in the hotels only take hard currency. It is as if the state runs its own legal black market to get foreign currency. You could say that the Soviet Union is an elaborate conspiracy to obtain hard currency.

But as soon as you leave the bosom of the Intourist hotel, you will meet the black market. It is everywhere. All manner of people on the street will propose every conceivable type of transaction. They will trade rubles for dollars at a rate of 3 or 4 rubles for one American dollar (the official rate is around 1.65 rubles per dollar). I was once offered 10 to one.

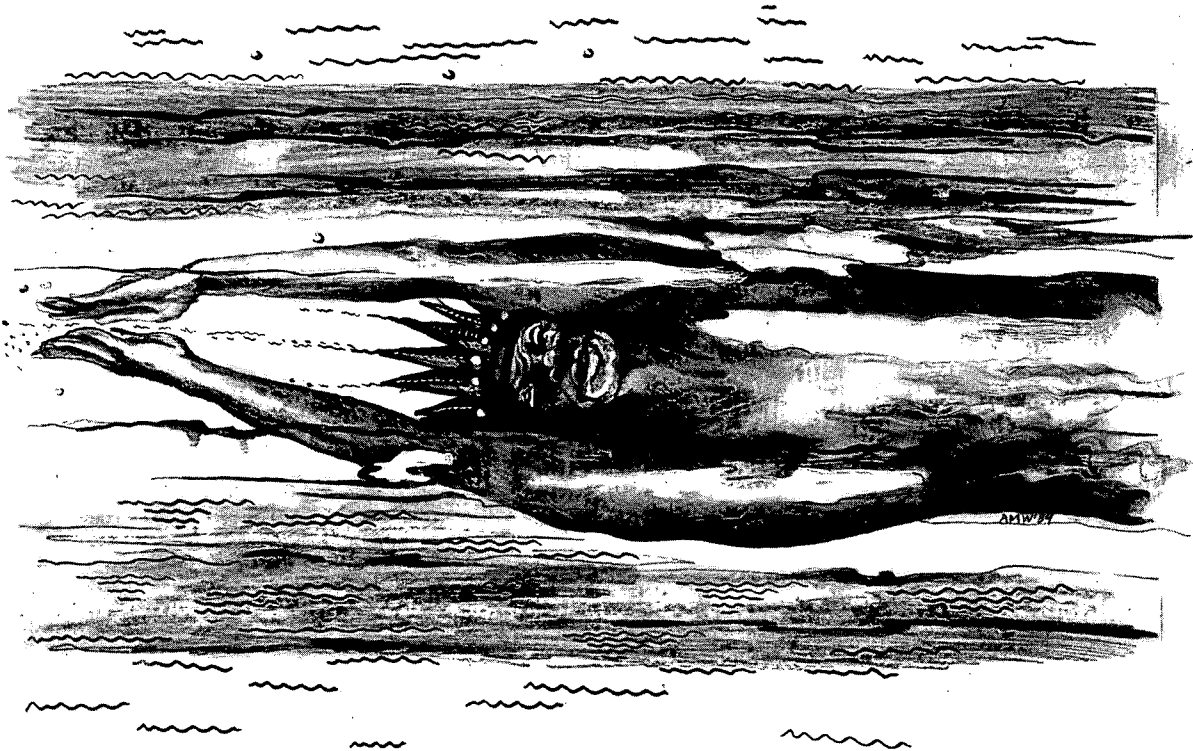
Why doesn't the government join the international community and let the value of the ruble be determined by the international market? Prices might rise dramatically; foreign brands might dominate the market; Soviet factories might close down and create unemployment. Autarky has always been the Soviet way.

So far I have been discussing *glasnost* and *perestroika*, words made popular by Soviet leader Gorbachev. I am indebted to Ronald Hingley (*The Russian Mind*) for bringing to my attention another Russian word, *vranyo*. Perhaps the best translation for this word is "blarney." It does not mean "a lie." Pure *vranyo* is done not so much for personal gain as to make a good story. The speaker of *vranyo* knows what he says is not true and knows that his listener knows it is not true. Both speaker and listener suspend their critical faculties to participate in the fantasy and the art of the story. Dostoyevsky wrote an article on *vranyo* and explained how the speaker actually believes what he is saying at the time he says it, and that a good listener will do likewise, especially if he has any manners.

I believe *vranyo* is very helpful in understanding *glasnost*, *perestroika*, and even *democratzia*. No Soviet leader really means that these terms should be taken seriously. Khrushchev, a master of *vranyo*, once said in a moment of candor that the Soviets would forsake Marxism-Leninism "when crabs begin to whistle." In the meantime *glasnost* and *perestroika* are nice stories to tell. ◇

# The Caribbean

by Geoffrey Wagner



For Albert Camus, the French Revolution initiated the modern age, killing God in the person of His representative on earth, the monarch. After which "Utopia replaces God by the future," as Camus nicely phrases it in *L'Homme Révolté*. God's anointed could no longer justify arbitrary action in this world by divine transcendence, and man (read "the people" today) became deified, with what results we know. The firing squad replaces the altar, even in Iran; and we no longer need a figure from the shadows like the Ayatollah to remind us that God has become the people.

At this point in the amputation of noumenal values the rebel turns into the terrorist, and abandons existence; as Camus puts it, "To be nothing—that is the cry of the mind exhausted by its own rebellion." Having watched two attempts at revolution in ex-British colonies (Malaya and Grenada), both abortive, I realize Camus is right; there is always a Robespierre waiting to be born. But surely he is wrong in completely ignoring the British revolution of 1642-1649, perhaps because he knew little about it. In this case, not only was the king by divine right beheaded, but his principal cleric, Archbishop Laud, went under the axe four years before him. Since then no prelate has held political office in England, though that gaitered buffoon (and Laud's successor), the Red Dean of Canterbury, made an ineffectual try.

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Geoffrey Wagner's book *Red Calypso*, on Cuban adventurism in the Caribbean and the Grenadian revolution, was reviewed in the April issue.

Perhaps also the fact that the monarchy was solidly restored in England upset Camus' theory; after all, the Bourbon restoration of 1816 in France soon came to an end with Louis-Philippe accepting the Lieutenant-Generalship of the kingdom in 1830. "Kings were put to death long before January 21, 1793," Camus concedes, but he makes no mention of Charles I, and brushes aside regicides like Ravaillac and Damiens as seeking reform rather than revolution. "They wanted another king and that was all. It never occurred to them that the throne could remain empty forever." It did to John Milton. Camus' lacuna or blind spot as regards England is made good in a copious compilation of contemporary sources, *The Good Old Cause*, edited by two Oxford Marxist dons, Christopher Hill and Edmund Dell. (That book was reviewed by Hugh Trevor-Roper under the heading "Up Hill and Down Dell.")

In 1979 I watched a handful of West Indians, mostly trained in London and assisted by Cubans, topple a defenseless parliamentary government in Grenada, then as now an independent Windward Island in the Caribbean. They were led by a handsome rabble-rouser called Maurice Bishop who was to end up playing a mixture of Kerensky and Trotsky (not to mention Barnum) to his assistant Bernard Coard's Lenin in an almost pedantic impersonation of the Russian revolution.

Bishop's "coop de tat" began ostensibly as a reform, but soon lost itself in the mire of a Marxism that could mean anything since it meant nothing—to the average cane-cutter or nutmeg-grower on the island. In fact, since the