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FROM RUSSIA

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TODAY THE COUNTRY, ESPECIALLY RUSSIA, IS WITNESSING A HIGH TIDE OF DEMOCRATIC REVIVAL. BUT IT WAS NOT THE EIGHT CONSPIRATORS WHO BROUGHT THE USSR TO THE BRINK OF DISASTER. IT WAS THE WHOLE PARTY, INCLUDING GORBACHEV HIMSELF.

Photo by Mark SHTENDOCK

GORBACHEV IS A SPENT FORCE POLITICALLY. HE IS NEEDED AS A SYMBOL OF RESTORED CONSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES. BUT THE FUTURE BELONGS TO YELTSIN AND THOSE WHO ACTIVELY OPPOSED THE TAKEOVER.

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During the putsch the West took the side of Russia's government, firmly and unequivocally. When the putsch failed, the victorious Yeltsin emerged as very much *primus inter pares*, but the power that helped him crush the junta now seems to the West to be too great.

Photo by Mark SHTENDOCK

A new Russian authoritarianism is clearly taking shape, and there is no stopping this. The West can do little except to offer economic aid or threaten to withdraw it. But on Yugoslavia, for example, the effect of this kind of pressure has been practically nil.

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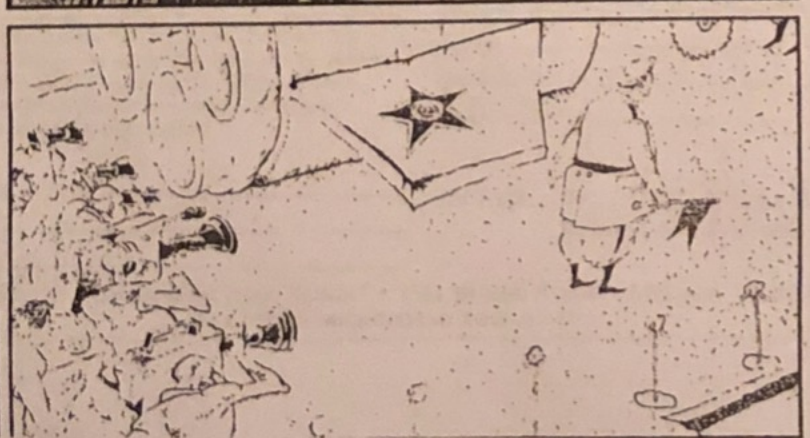

The Independent from Russia

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Viewpoint

SECOND TRAIN TO MINSK

"Last night I was watching the meeting in the square. An extraordinary sight! Mother Russia on the move, she can't stand still, she's restless and she can't find rest, she's talking and she can't stop." Pasternak, *Dr. Zhivago.*

Early in July I sat alone in my hotel room looking out over the gloomy landscape of the proletarian bedrooms of Moscow — row after row of Orwellian apartment buildings — when the phone rang. Anytime this happens in Russia it's something of a shock — there are never personal calls, only official ones. The phone just sits there mutely in a kind of threatening irrelevance.

"Mister McMath?" came on overly friendly voice.

"Yes," I said with some anxiety.

"About your journey tonight... You'll be taking the second train..."

"Oh?"

"Yes, the second train... from Byelorussia Station... to Minsk... have a nice journey." Click.

I put down the receiver. I was indeed going to Minsk. But I had not known on which train. Now I knew, it was the second one. That seemed odd, a little too specific. What was wrong with going on the first train to Minsk? I could imagine them mulling it over. "No, we'll put him on the second train... that's the one he needs to go on." I looked out the window again. Now the honeycombs of socialist construction seemed even gloomier. I had visited similar apartment buildings, knew the dreary ride up the creaky elevator, the dreary hallway and the dreary little rooms where people lived almost like prisoners. Why don't they rebel? Then, I realized that was precisely what was happening. The Russians were rebelling — the whole thing was finally coming apart. But what would replace it? This made me shudder. Suddenly, I was glad to be going to Minsk, even if it was on the second train, the second one from Byelorussia station.

Little did I know that I was literally standing on the edge of a volcano, one that was to erupt within a few weeks, almost in my face. That a coup d'etat would explode, threaten civil war, confrontation with the West, Armageddon even, then suddenly, mysteriously, sputter out, leaving as many questions as answers. Gorbachev gone, finished, then like the political Houdini he is, returned from oblivion!

Once again the world would hold its breath over the fate or Russia, a country which always seems so mysterious and frightening. Like a drunken bear, Russia would once again swing wildly out of control, first this way, then that, impervious to everything but what is under its nose — within range of tooth or claw. Nothing for the world to do but get out of its way and hope.

As I looked out the window, one had a sense of this, that things were going to happen, and it was good to be leaving Moscow, even if it were for Byelorussia. Byelorussia? Where is that? It's "white Russia" a Soviet Republic bordered by Poland on the west and Lithuania and Latvia to the north — Russia is to the east and the Ukraine the south. It's about one third the size of Texas with ten million people. The people are handsome, friendly and industrious. Minsk is the capital.

Byelorussia would seem to be a happy land. But it's on the road to Moscow. Being on the road to Moscow has never been an ingredient for happiness. One only has to ask the Balts, the Poles, the Finns, Ukrainians, Byelorussians or the Russians themselves about the price one pays for living on any road that might lead to Moscow. Take Minsk. Napoleon burned it. Then it was destroyed in World War I and again by Hitler. More recently it got Chernobyled.

In any case, I was definitely going there, going on the second train, traveling to a conference under the auspices of the "Forum for American-Soviet Dialogue." My commission was "Law and Democracy." Those are nice, warm, conforting words, very American, western and homey, but they seemed strangely irrelevant as I squirmed my luggage through the crush that was Moscow's Byelorussia station. It was chaos. There were lots of trains leaving for lots of places and the people boarding them were swarming more like refugees than casual travelers. I thought of the train station scene in *Dr. Zhivago*. I got lost, then went to the wrong train. Forget English at Byelorussia station, but my Russian was no better, so I found myself yelling in Spanish. I can't explain it, but for some reason border town Spanish yelled loudly enough seems to be universally understood. I got pointed toward the second train to Minsk.

Who else would want to go to Minsk? Well, there were four of us in a small compartment — two double bunks and a little table in between. My roommates were Americans named Klissas, King and Chavez. Klissas was a Greek-Orthodox lawyer from Virginia more interested in churches than conferences; King was a poet from Idaho, and Chavez a health-care specialist from New Mexico. And since King and Chavez were named Kathleen and Margo, we all slept in our clothes. In fact, we spent most of our time standing in the hall watching central Russia slide away during the brief night.

Trains in Russia are not new to me. I had ridden the Trans-Siberian for eight days from the Pacific. Clicking off Nakhodka, Khabarhovsk, Chita, Ulan-Ude, Irkutsk, Novosibirsk, Omsk, Yaroslavl, Zagorsk, Moscow, then to Leningrad, and on to Helsinki. Now I was going to Minsk — on the second train. I have a thing for trains in Russia. Perhaps this is because Russians have a thing for trains in Russia. It's a symbol, a symbol of modern Russia replacing the older, holy Russia of the past. In Russian literature trains have become symbols of a modernity that alternates between threat and promise — the diastole and systole of Russian history — repression and chaos — tanks and cheers — threat and promise — on and on it goes.

In Moscow the highlight for me had been a brief chat with Roy Medvedev, a leading intellectual dissenter. He has traditionally been, as a neo-Marxist theoretician, to the left of Sakharov, the liberal. I asked him two questions. What is the role of Marxism today? And, secondly, why doesn't Solzhenitsyn come home and play a part in the revolution he did so much to create? Essentially, his answer to the first was that Marxism has no role to play in its specifics. But as a general program of humanistic concern for social justice and equality, he maintained, it was still important. It seemed to me Medvedev has moved closer to Sakharov. What's the difference, really?

Of course, I could not know then, but the answer to this question was to be answered dramatically on August 19th, because not once during the coup did the junta mention socialism, or a return to Marxist-Leninist principles, or anything of the sort, as a justification. And, if not them, who? And, if not then, when? Marxism-Leninism is dead in Russia. And, if it's not alive there, where?

Then, as to Solzhenitsyn, Medvedev said that I would have to ask Solzhenitsyn. Of course, I would love to. I thought about this as I stared out into the night on the second train to Minsk, rolling as I was through the wonderful countryside of central Russia, a land filled with villages, forests, and roads to Moscow. Then it occurred to me that I didn't have to ask Solzhenitsyn that second question. The answer is obvious, and, it too was answered on the 19th. Russia is not about to settle nicely, after an obligatory period of economic and political pain under condescending western guidance, into democratic-capitalism. Because for Solzhenitsyn, Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and all the others are but transitory figures — brief riders on the train of history. Solzhenitsyn's return will have a certain timing, like Lenin pulling into Finland Station, seemingly late, but really arriving at just the critical moment.

No, I decided as I stood staring out of the window while the train gathered speed faster and faster like Russia herself, Solzhenitsyn has not missed the train at all, he's already ahead of it, waiting for Russia at the next station, the one of his own choosing. What will happen I cannot say, but it will not be neat, or clean, or well planned. It will not be "cost effective" or based on "systems analysis." In a word, not German or American or western, but quite Russian, filled with contradictions, the irrational, the incredible, the horrible and the magnificent.

I knew then why I was on the second train, the first would have been too early. I got to see the sun set among the forests and villages of the countryside and rise again in the city. Timing is everything. I knew, too, that Solzhenitsyn was on the second train for the same reason, the first was too early, arriving before Russia has swept them all away. Because to Solzhenitsyn, one does not understand Russia through reason, one believes in her, then one understands — this is why she is such a great paradox, so unpredictable, so terrible, and so full of promise. But, I asked myself, as we pulled into Minsk in the burning light of morning, isn't what he is hoping for little more than a search for a lost morality, a lost tradition, a golden age that never really quite was? Or was it, can it be, something else; something new for all of us? I wondered then and now. But of one thing I am certain, it is the question of our time, and I don't have the answer. And like the train to Minsk, I ride and wonder, ride and wonder when and where it will stop next.

By Phillip H. McMATH