

# GETTING THE FINGER-TIP FEEL

## Reporting on the Soviet Union in the Late Fifties and Sixties

BY COLETTE SHULMAN

**T**he emptying of Stalin's GULAG began right after his death in 1953 with the release of those held on criminal charges. Soon Khrushchev included political prisoners and exiles, and from 1956 onward, hundreds of thousands came home, a movement of survivors unseen and unknown by us Western noncommunist journalists stationed in Moscow.

Khrushchev's "secret speech" of March 1956, and its repercussions inside the country and beyond, put Moscow on the front pages worldwide for months. Yet we were severely challenged in our reporting. No travel outside Moscow without permission, and then only to major Soviet republic capitals. Few local sources of news—TASS bulletins, official and often useless press conferences, reading between the lines of newspapers, talking with West European ambassadors briefed by their own intelligence sources. Whatever emerged from our searches was subject to Soviet censorship. I remember the frustration of my bureau chief, Henry Shapiro, trying to cover Moscow's reaction to the Hungarian Revolution in November





1956. Not a word from officialdom, and the phone line to Budapest was dead. Of his sometimes revealing Russian contacts he complained, “They get scared and won’t tell you anything.”

I joined the United Press (UP) Moscow bureau in the middle of this tumult as a wholly inexperienced reporter. What Henry expected of me I knew not, only that we became three to the AP’s two. I had spent the year before teaching in and running the small Anglo-American School under the British and American embassies and knew my way around central Moscow. During those first weeks in autumn 1956 of absorbing news agency routine, I had some free time and determined to carve out my own sphere of reporting. The Russian Institute’s two-year program of intensive language and area studies gave me the confidence to walk Moscow streets and talk with whomever would respond. I walked into shops and schools and buildings where it looked like something interesting might be going on. I was young, attractive, speaking Russian, saying I was an American journalist bent on informing readers abroad what everyday life was like in Moscow.

Some people put me off with “Come back tomorrow”; others talked, and out of these conversations came dozens of feature articles. About Soviet cars: Who could get hold of one and afford to buy it? What were people watching on Russian TV? How easy was it for a woman to get an abortion, which once again was legal? High school graduates celebrating on Red Square and going down to the river to greet the dawn. Press Department–arranged interviews with the Bolshoi Ballet School’s best pupil who became a prima ballerina; and with the Russian Republic’s minister of culture, describing an exciting period in the 1920s, bringing literacy to peasant women in the deep countryside. My editors called for more; our UP clients were curious after years of Iron Curtain separation.

As political repercussions increased, articles reported heated debate at student-faculty meetings, the Moscow young well informed from access to Polish and Yugoslav newspapers and East Europeans studying in Moscow. During the Hungarian Revolution an institute bulletin board asked: WHAT ARE SOVIET TROOPS DOING IN HUNGARY? At an exhibition of

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*Opposite page:* Colette Shulman.

*Above:* Shulman interviews Ilya Ehrenburg for WGBH (1967).

An impressive collection of mostly French paintings adorn the walls of his apartment. Ehrenburg died a few weeks later.



Picasso, young voices advocated complete freedom for Soviet painters, to which the official response was: students have been making too many “demagogic” speeches.

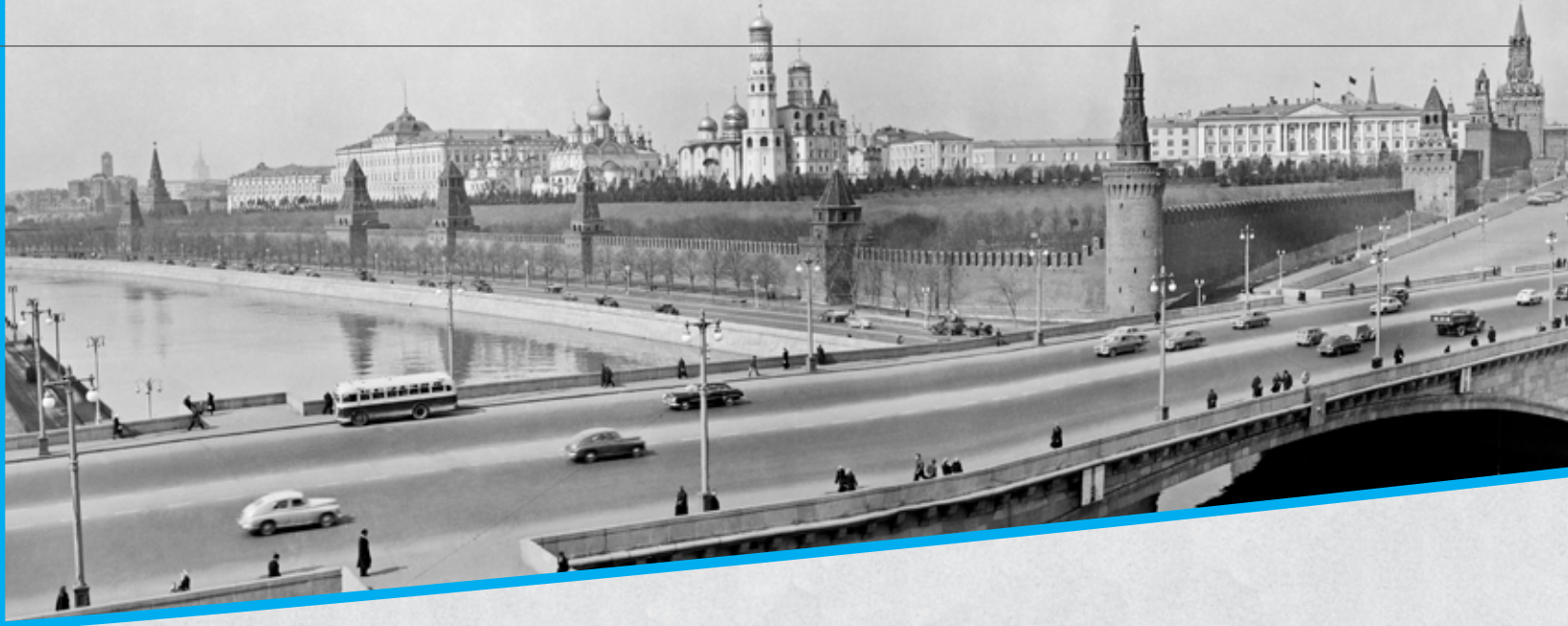
I began writing interpretations of Soviet policy in various areas. One about the Middle East referred to then Foreign Minister Dmitri Shepilov, with whom I had spoken at an embassy reception—a big man with a leonine head of hair, soon to disappear as a member of the “anti-party” group of Malenkov, Molotov, and Kaganovich. What happened to them? I was standing outside the prestigious Botkin Hospital, waiting to interview someone when Shepilov, in pajamas and bathrobe, walked by me with a companion to a secluded bench. I went over, recalled our conversation, and wished him a good recovery; and I got my comeuppance when he looked straight at me and said, “You are mistaken; I am not Shepilov.” The censor blacked that out but left the several references to his illness.

From 1956 to 1959 I coincided with almost the last of the old Russian intelligentsia who had survived the purges and the war. I saw them at concerts in the Conservatory, the

Scriabin Museum, Tolstoy’s House, and the Tretyakov Gallery. They were still working as writers, scientists, doctors, restorers of museum art, and translators of Western literature, and a few still teaching in secondary schools influencing the young.

An interview with Boris Pasternak in his home in Peredelkino, the writers’ colony outside Moscow, on the morning after he won the Nobel Prize remains memorable. He was outwardly pleased to have been so honored. In response to a question, he was off on a 15-minute discourse about the scientific and technical achievements in the world over the past 50 years, how the position of the writer and the artist has changed since his father illustrated the novels of Tolstoy, that he receives many letters from abroad about *Doctor Zhivago* and tries to answer them all, and how the beautiful French translation of his novel made him weep on reading it. Then he returned to my original question and answered it simply and to the point. There was a childlike quality about him—a vulnerability— together with an enormous power of concentration. His long-boned face was full of expression and warmth—I was altogether captivated.

*Above: Shulman (far right) interviewing Moscow University students (Summer 1967).*



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Above: View of the Moscow Kremlin (1956), via ITAR-TASS News Agency/Alamy Stock Photo.

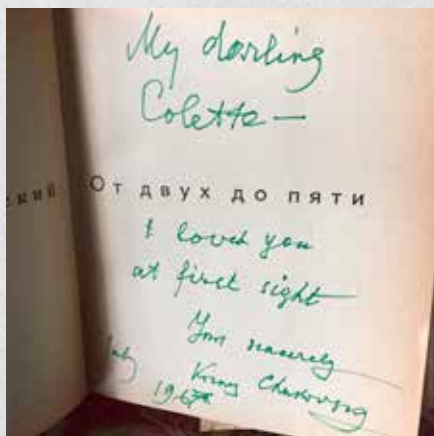
The censor held up my article for 24 hours awaiting the official response. Although no surprise, it nonetheless shocked me; it was impossible to recognize the Pasternak I had listened to in the vitriolic attacks by *Pravda* and the *Literary Gazette* calling him a traitor, a slanderer, an immoral second-rate writer. A few days later his wife, Zinaida, said he had suffered a mild heart attack—"I am going to cook for him as well as I can; and we will live here quietly, with no interviews, no commotion."

Nine years later, back in Peredelkino to film Korney Chukovsky telling stories to the village children, I arrived with two "minders" instead of the usual one. Chukovsky took a good long look at them and with a subtle gesture whispered in my ear, "If I were you, I would prefer this one to that one." Good as my instincts about people generally were, they got sharpened in being with Russians. In 1967 I also filmed conversations with the writer Ilya Ehrenburg and with Nobel physicist Igor Tamm; by early 1971 all three had died.

Many of the faces I saw on the streets and in the subways suggested a worker-peasant background.

Older *babushki*, reflecting the Russian village's collective responsibility for looking after one another's children, thought nothing of telling me in winter to put on my hat or, when I was tiptoeing around the back of a large church looking at icons, "Devushka, eto ne muzei" (Young lady, this is not a museum). In remote Russian villages there had existed a communality that enabled them to survive. It was admired, even seen as a model for the future by Slavophiles. In college I thought this might be a distinctive trait of Russian life; as a reporter in Moscow I heard more about the cruelty of collectivization and saw the crush of urban indoor living. People hated communal apartments; they yearned for privacy and room to breathe. It was a clear caution against generalizing about national traits in a country as large and culturally varied as Russia.

I began to reflect on when there is a sharp break between generations as against what gets transmitted from one to another. When talking with bright, educated 20-year-olds in 1956, I knew they must have absorbed something of their parents' deep fear during the late Stalin years. They showed no sign of it. Sometimes



Korney Chukovsky's book *From Two to Five*, inscribed to Shulman.

they showed anxiety in conversing with an American, in criticizing their surroundings, in hoping that after Stalin things would be better. How, I wonder, have they negotiated the ups and downs that followed? Now in their eighties, do they fear the severe repression of public protest—if not for themselves, then for their children and grandchildren?

Women's attitudes toward men became for me an example of what gets transmitted. In the early '60s two Russian friends had companions who were heavy drinkers. Not unusual. Unattached men were still scarce from heavy wartime losses, their weaknesses tolerated by women who wanted a child and some companionship. My reflections on the continuity of attitudes passed from mothers to daughters over several generations developed gradually in dialogues with women.

In autumn 1957, when our correspondent in Warsaw was expelled on charges of espionage, I was sent in to replace him for three months. It was a year after the "Polish October" that shook the country, returned Władysław Gomułka to power, and nearly provoked Soviet troops to intervene. Polish Communism struggled with

the deep roots of Polish Catholicism. Religious education reentered the school curriculum. At Christmastime St. Nicholas once again appeared; the Kremlin's Santa Claus Father Frost had gone home, Poles said with a smile. It was good for me to be exposed to a culture different from Russia's, to feel the national cohesion of a people whose land had been overrun and claimed by rulers and their armies over the centuries. Warmly as I felt about Poland, I was glad to get back to Moscow, where the ungainly Polish language could not "mess up" my Russian.

In the 1960s, I continued reporting from Cambridge, Massachusetts, on a 15-minute weekly prime time public television program, *Soviet Press This Week*, giving me freedom to talk about whatever seemed important. I drew on the daily press and the revelations of *Novy mir* and other literary-societal magazines—Alexander Solzhenitsyn on the GULAG, Victor Nekrasov's reenvisioning the battle of Stalingrad, the "village writers" on the poverty of the Russian countryside, memoirs, and stories. These probing glimpses as well as travels to Kyiv, the Black Sea, and the grain-growing areas of Kazakhstan broadened my sense of the

Below: Chukovsky (1962), via ITAR-TASS News Agency/Alamy Stock Photo. Opposite page: Shulman with Jonathan Sanders, assistant director of the Harriman Institute (1986); photo by Wm. W. Irwin.



Soviet Union's hugeness, its variety of landscapes and peoples.

The program's first year—from the assassination of Kennedy to the overthrow of Khrushchev—was dominated by the Sino-Soviet conflict and particularly by domestic preoccupation with the problems of Soviet agriculture. Politically weakened from withdrawing the missiles from Cuba, Khrushchev was criticized by the Chinese in one attack after another saying he was afraid of war, he was losing his commitment to world revolution, and he was becoming too bourgeois with all his talk of people needing a better life. Khrushchev himself was concerned about the influence of Chinese views in Africa, where Chou En-lai visited 10 countries trying to establish a presence there, with an eye to China's long-term advantage.

Following issues from week to week, I became more adept at reading between the lines. My audiences in Boston, New York, Washington, San Francisco, and in between were on the whole educated and dedicated, commenting appreciatively and often

controversially. Coming to know the USSR in some depth, gaining a fingertip feel, also brought me face to face with the ignorance and prejudices inflicting many Americans. At a hearing on the television program in the Massachusetts legislature, it was stated that "Miss" Shulman reported things from the Soviet Union that were really propaganda in the guise of news reporting. I was criticized from both left and right.

A favorite letter from a reader came in response to an article about how carefully and attractively Nina Khrushchev had dressed for the Khrushchevs' White House dinner with the Eisenhowers in 1959. "So many unkind remarks have been made in regard to Mrs. Khrushchev's dress and because she does not wear lipstick or jewelry . . . imply[ing] what a common person she is. . . . Anything wrong with being common? . . . The effect on the people of Russia of these remarks fills me with some concern. Also, for them to think clothes are so important here. . . . Thank you, again, for such a kind article."

You've paid tribute to my reporting, Mrs. Stineman from Indiana, and to the importance of kindness in our lives. ■

*Colette Shulman has been a journalist and editor, facilitated and participated in cultural and educational exchanges, and with colleagues shaped a newsletter into a Russian-language magazine for women in Russia creating NGOs in the emerging civil society of the 1990s. She was a student at the Russian Institute from 1953 to 1955.*

