


I landed in Leningrad on a blustery day in January 1981, just one week before the inauguration of Ronald Reagan, to begin my research on early 19th-century Russian historical drama as an IREX Fellow. That very day, a Soviet scholar arrived in the United States to start a reciprocal fellowship. Until the USSR collapsed, formal academic exchanges between the United States and the Soviet

Union operated every year despite the vicissitudes of U.S.-Soviet relations. Each side would select its fellows; and the host countries would provide access to research holdings, housing, and stipends to cover living expenses. The only difference was that American scholars by and large studied history and literature and spent their time in dusty libraries leafing through ancient documents, while their Soviet counterparts were scientists who headed to state-of-the-art laboratories at leading American research universities.

In 1968, with generous support from the Ford Foundation, several major U.S. universities established IREX (International Research & Exchanges Board) to serve as the principal interlocutor with the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union, as well as with the academies of science in Eastern Europe. IREX incorporated the earlier exchange programs operated by



St. Petersburg panorama: Peter and Paul Fortress, Admiralty, Hermitage Museum, via Alamy.

the Inter-University Committee on Travel Grants, initially housed at Columbia University; and the coveted IREX fellowship became, in Robert Belknap's memorable words, the "rite of passage" for scholars in Russian and East European studies.

Getting ready for the IREX fellowship was akin to preparing for a long trek into the wilderness. One had to plan for shortages of everyday goods, sparse living conditions, lack of medications, and a meager diet. Even worse, there was no guarantee that one would get access to the archival

materials noted in the application form or meet the right Russian experts. To help young American scholars, IREX alumni set up an informal network that would provide invaluable advice: whom to call on the first day in the Soviet Union (and only from a public pay phone); what over-the-counter medications to bring for older scholars—as well as an array of lipsticks for the archivists and the required gifts for the directors of the relevant institutions. This preparatory work was exceptionally important and if done right could lead to a fruitful

and enjoyable exchange experience. I spent weeks buying the necessary gifts and arrived in Leningrad with six stuffed suitcases. Naturally, as the only American on the Aeroflot flight from Helsinki, I was pulled aside by the customs officials and told to open my luggage. To my embarrassment out tumbled make-up kits, pantyhose, lipstick, aspirin, and several bottles of whiskey. "Опять американцы со своей аптекой" (again, Americans with their own pharmacy), muttered the Soviet official and with an air of exasperation waved me through.



THE SUCCESS OF U.S.-RUSSIA ACADEMIC EXCHANGES DURING THE COLD WAR

BY MARK
G. POMAR

Since I had defended my doctoral dissertation a few years earlier, the Academy of Sciences considered me a “senior fellow” and that entailed certain privileges. While most IREX Fellows were housed in dilapidated dormitories, the Academy placed me in the new Hotel Leningrad, situated on the Neva with spectacular views of the city. It also provided a handsome stipend of roughly 300 rubles a month, access to the best library reading rooms, and tickets to the Kirov Opera and major concert halls, as well as occasional invitations to formal receptions with high-level Soviet officials. I took advantage of these unexpected luxuries, but my aim was to break free of my “Soviet minders” and to explore unofficial Russian culture and get to know independently minded Russians.

Until Mikhail Gorbachev’s policy of glasnost allowed for greater freedom, the IREX exchange program was one of the few ways Americans could live in the Soviet Union for extended periods

of time, interact relatively freely with Soviet citizens, and work in Soviet institutions, if only as outside experts. To get the most from my fellowship, I followed the advice of the IREX alumni. After receiving my official Soviet documents, I called the first person on my list of contacts and was immediately invited to dinner. That led quickly to more dinner invitations, and before long I was visiting new friends in their modest apartments and sometimes even in communal apartments. I recall spending an evening in a shabby apartment on the outskirts of Leningrad as my hosts tried to entertain me by tuning in the Russian broadcasts of VOA, BBC, and RL, despite the whirring and crackling coming from the local jamming stations.

While I regularly attended the Kirov Opera and symphony concerts, my most memorable cultural experience was discovering the Molodezhny Theatre. Through the informal IREX alumni network I met the director, Vladimir Malishchitsky, who invited me to come to the rehearsals and performances as his personal guest. In contrast to most Leningrad theaters, the Molodezhny was experimental in design and daring in its productions. Although many plays in 1981 dealt with conventional Soviet themes such as World War II and revolutionary movements, Malishchitsky imbued his productions with a spirit of individual freedom. “Our intention is to resurrect the truth of the past,” he would tell me, “and not allow it to be buried.” By challenging the red lines of Soviet censorship, the Molodezhny Theatre became a rare “public space” where not only could taboo subjects be voiced on stage but also audience members were invited to provide comments after each



performance and then discuss their views with the director and the actors in an open forum.

In the waning years of Leonid Brezhnev's rule, a comparable sense of *political frisson* extended even to the staid world of Soviet archives and libraries. Although IREX Fellows stayed clear of political activity, our presence in Soviet institutions inevitably caused concern among the staff. Most librarians and archivists treated us with utmost caution and were wary of bringing us materials that could be used to produce "anti-Russian" publications. In sharp contrast, some staff went out of their way to convey a sense of solidarity, communicating to us in subtle ways that they wanted to help us understand the essence of the Soviet system and see an unvarnished picture of Russia. One day, as I was examining letters from the early 19th century, a young archivist asked if I wanted to see the real treasures of the Saltykov-Shchedrin Public Library. He then led me to a large dark

room in the bowels of the building. As he turned on the lights, I was stunned to see hundreds of incunabula—works in Latin illustrated with exquisite miniature drawings. When I asked him why these works were not displayed on the main floor, he told me that they had been stolen from the Warsaw National Library after the third partition of Poland in the late 18th century. Over time, some works were returned to Poland, but the most precious ones remained hidden in the library. The archivist wanted me to see these treasures and draw my own conclusions about the nature of Soviet rule and its impact on Russian-Polish relations.

In all likelihood, some of my informal contacts were reporting on

my activities to the KGB, but that did not affect my easy interaction with Russians. The people I met were eager to engage in serious discussions about the Soviet Union and U.S.-Russian relations. As trust grew, some even shared with me their abhorrence of Soviet ideology and practice, telling me that they simply wanted to live as free people.

As Gorbachev's policy of glasnost gained momentum in the late 1980s, the IREX exchanges began to lose their Cold War aura. American scholars were now welcomed in Soviet institutions, and library resources were readily accessible. The collapse of the Soviet Union further changed the nature of exchanges. Postcommunist Russia could no longer afford to host foreign scholars, and formal government-to-government agreements seemed unnecessary since the new Russian government allowed Western universities and NGOs to administer language study programs and research

Opposite page: Mark Pomar's Soviet library card from 1981.

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fellowships by setting up their own offices in Moscow.

In those heady times, the U.S. government passed the Freedom Support Act (FSA) of 1992 that allocated hundreds of millions of dollars to help integrate the former Soviet Union with the West. In the case of exchanges, the U.S. government was now ready to fund the Russian students, researchers, and professionals who would study in the U.S. as well as the Americans heading to Russia. But the allocation of resources turned out to be lopsided. The overwhelming amount of money went to support participants from the former communist countries through many different programs: from short-term business training sessions and study tours for Russian judges and jurists to the establishment of internet centers in rural Russian libraries and American Corners in major cities. Among the more significant achievements of FSA funding was the establishment of large programs for students at the high school, undergraduate, and graduate levels that offered thousands of young

people from across the former Soviet Union the opportunity to study in the U.S. and, in some cases, even earn American degrees. So expansive was U.S. government funding that USAID even set up enterprise funds throughout the former Eastern bloc that invested tens of millions of dollars in small- and medium-sized businesses on a commercial basis. The purpose of the investments was not only to teach Western business practices but also to earn a profit that could then be converted into an endowment that would fund free-standing foundations. Several investment funds were so successful that we now have large foundations in Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, and Russia that continue to fund educational and cultural programs.

As president of IREX, I saw

the merit of many FSA-funded programs but felt that, in the exuberance of the post-Cold War era, the U.S. government was shortchanging Americans preparing for scholarly careers in Russian and postcommunist studies. As vital as it was to help former Soviet citizens understand Western democracy and society, it was no less important for Americans to spend long periods of time conducting research in Russia and the former republics of the Soviet Union. In the 1990s and at the start of the new century, IREX sought funding from private sources to support American scholarship and received grants from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Starr Foundation, and several individual donors. But to operate at scale, IREX needed government funding. Together with my colleagues at American Councils, the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research, and the Kennan Institute, I would make our pitch at State Department meetings and in Congress, arguing that support for American scholars



Opposite page: Rooftop view of St. Petersburg, via Alamy.
Left: Mark Pomar.

was fundamental if we were to gain a more nuanced understanding of a rapidly changing and potentially dangerous part of the world. Fortunately, our collective lobbying efforts were successful in preserving a modicum of funding for the former Eastern bloc countries, known as the Title VIII account of the Department of State annual budget. This funding provided merit-based grants to American citizens for research in the humanities and social sciences, as well as for advanced language study. It was indispensable for supporting American scholarship and launching many successful careers. With a deep “cold peace” settling in, and the shuttering of American educational exchange organizations in Russia, this may be an appropriate moment to look for useful lessons

from an earlier era. Even in the most politically tense periods of the Cold War, including the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and the U.S. boycott of the 1980 Olympics in Moscow, educational exchange programs between the U.S. and the Soviet Union continued to function without interruption. Given its distrust of Western NGOs and foundations, today’s Russian government may be amenable to reestablishing formal government-to-government exchange programs that would be apolitical in nature and would operate on a reciprocal basis. Like its Soviet predecessor, the Putin government could see the mutual benefits of student and scholar exchanges and the role they could play in developing a healthier U.S.-Russia relationship. Most important, these programs would give the next generation of American experts on Russia and Eurasia the opportunity to gain greater fluency in Russian, to get to know Russians, and to develop a personal “feel” for the complexities of post-Soviet societies. ■

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