

My trip to Moscow in 1990, before the fall of the Soviet Union

J. Harford
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Soviet ICBMs parade in Moscow, 1990, the last parade honoring the Bolshevik Revolution

I felt it was time to write down my experience in Moscow in 1990 . . . before the fall of the Soviet empire.

In 1990 CARP had a 21 day workshop in Hungary for students from the Soviet Union. They needed team leaders for that workshop, and I volunteered to go. It was a beautiful workshop in the country outside of Budapest. The members of my team were all from Moscow and they had many deep experiences. They asked me repeatedly to come to Moscow after the end of the workshop. As I prayed about it, the spirit was so strong pushing me to go. I called Jack Corley in Moscow and he encouraged me to come.

To make the trip to Moscow, I needed two things: a visa and a train ticket. So, I went to the Soviet Embassy in Budapest and requested a visa. They asked me why I wanted to go to Moscow, and I told them I wanted to visit friends there. Reluctantly, they gave me the visa. Only later did I realize that the visa was for only 48 hours. I called Jack Corley in Moscow and told him the situation thinking that I was not going to be able to make the trip, but I was surprised when he said, "Don't worry, just get to Moscow and our professor friends that can get your visa extended.

Because of the time needed to get the passport, all my students had left for Moscow on a previous train. I had to make the 36 hour trip all by myself, yet there was an unusual peace inside of me and confidence that God was watching over me.

The train from Budapest to Moscow left at midnight. It was like something out of a movie. Mist and smoke surrounded the train as I offered my ticket and passport to the conductor. He looked at my passport, his eyebrows raised and simply said in a clear voice, "Americanski."

The Soviet trains had an aisle down the left side of the train and compartments on the right, much like the Hogwarts train in the Harry Potter movies though a bit bigger. There were four bunks in each compartment, two on each side. The bottom bunks doubled as couches during the daytime. As I walked down the aisle to my compartment, the last one on that car, at each door I heard mumblings, "Americanski, Americanski."

Of course, no one in my compartment spoke a bit of English. Fortunately, I had purchased a Russian / English dictionary in Budapest. There was a nice couple in my compartment from Tbilisi, Georgia. Through the dictionary, he told me he was a taxi driver. His wife gave me some food since me not realizing the trip was 36 hours had not prepared any food. There was always the strong Russian tea available for drink. It was the middle of winter. There was five to six feet of snow on either side of the

train. More than once I thought, If I get thrown off this train, no one will ever know.

The trip was going pretty smoothly and then it just stopped. We were at the border between Ukraine and Russia. The Russians designed their train tracks to be a different width than those of bordering countries to make sure trainloads of soldiers could not make a surprise entry into Russia. The train had to be lifted car by car and the wheels adjusted to the width of the Russian tracks.

This was also a time to check the passports and visas of all the passengers on the train. A Soviet officer entered our car and proceeded to talk to the couple from Tbilisi. He called in a conductor who confiscated several bags of items from the couple and then walked over to me. His face was stern, without a single semblance of compassion. He looked at me and asked for my passport. He looked at the passport almost in disbelief. He looked at me. He looked at the passport and motioned me to stand up. He looked at the passport holding it up to my face to make sure the picture matched. He motioned me to sit down. He then repeated that process again . . . passport, stand up, sit down, and then finally handed me the passport and abruptly left the cabin.

That was surely one of the most scary moments of my life. Shortly afterwards, the train moved again.

Soon after that I was to learn a little about what it means to be a taxi driver. We had been on the move for a short while when the taxi driver left the compartment and then returned 30 minutes or so with all of his bags of goodies that had been confiscated at the border. I gave him a kind of funny look. He smiled and rubbed his fingers together indicating he had paid the appropriate bribe to get back the radios, tape decks, and other electrical appliances that were considered contraband. Taxi driver is a synonym for black market dealer.

When we arrived in Moscow I called Jack Corley and we arranged a meetup place at a hotel. My Tbilisi friend hooked me up to a local taxi driver who took me to my destination.

When we finally arrived at Jack's apartment, he asked me for the passport and said he would get it extended so I could stay for 3 weeks. I ask him what I should do in the meantime and he said, "don't worry about it, you will be ok" and for some reason, I believed him. I walked around Moscow for two weeks without a passport and was never questioned. Again, there must have been an army of angels watching over me.

Jack introduced me to one of his key staff members, Nate Windman and Nate asked me if I could help him with a mission. I replied, of course, without even asking about the contents of the "mission." He then told me he had some business to be done at the bank and at the time that sounded reasonable. The "bank" he was talking about was actually a taxi and the banker was the taxi driver. This was another lesson in how the black market worked in Moscow in those days.



Russian black market moneychanger in 1990

At the brick and mortar banks the exchange rate was at that time 8 rubles per dollar. The exchange rate

for "Hard Currency" i.e. American dollars was 20 rubles per dollar. So, by using the highly illegal, though pretty much socially accepted taxi bank the hard earned dollars of the CARP and other fundraisers could go two and a half times as far. Our mission was to exchange \$1000 for 20,000 rubles. I was informed of this only after getting into the taxi and on our way to the transaction.

Nate was conversational with Russian and turned over the \$1,000 to the taxi driver/black marketeer what was needed. We were dropped off in the middle of nowhere and half an hour later the taxi returned, we hopped into the back seat, and he handed over two bags of rubles. Nate gave me a bag and directed me to count it. There were all kinds of bills in the bag: 100, 50, 25, 10, 5, 3, and 1 ruble notes. I was sweating like crazy, praying that I would not be thrown into some Siberian gulag.

Finally, we completed the counting and the number was correct. Those minutes were some of the longest I have ever experienced. And then Nate, without the least expression on his face spoke to the driver, "Can you do another \$1,000?"

One of my students invited me to the 2 room flat belonging to his family. It was a simple apartment in a tall apartment building amongst many tall apartment buildings lining both sides of a busy street. A two room flat has a bedroom and a living room with a small kitchen and bathroom crammed in there somewhere. At one end of the living room was a floor to ceiling set of cabinets and shelves that was actually pretty nicely done. That living room also served as a bedroom, TV room, dining room and whatever else was needed. Everyone in Moscow in those days was poor or at least appeared to be poor. My friends mother brought tea and then a tray of snacks, including some Russian caviar. Later, I asked him how they could afford to have caviar. He said he has a friend at the caviar factory. The underground market was a barter market and my friend had taught himself how to repair TVs.

One day the students from my workshop group invited me to lunch and they had a special place they wanted to take me. I was looking forward to some good local Russian food. However, the special place they wanted to take me was McDonalds. In Moscow and most of the Soviet Union one had to stand in line for almost everything. We used to tell a joke at the CAUSA conferences something like this.

Two Moscow men were standing in the line for hours to get shoes and the line was not moving. Finally, one man says, I can't take it anymore. I am going to kill Premier Yeltsin. About an hour later the man returns and joins the end of the line. His friend yells back to him. Well, did you kill Yeltsin? The other replied no . . . the line to kill Yeltsin is longer than the line for shoes.



On January 31, 1990, the first Soviet McDonald's opened in Moscow. The first McDonald's ever in Soviet Union

Of all the lines in Moscow, the line for McDonalds was the longest. It stretched from the door down a series of steps to the street, a half a block down that street turned left across the street for another full block and then left again for another half block. Fortunately, it was also the fastest line in Moscow, so it only took about an hour to get our order in. The students were quite happy we could get our food so quickly.

Two things were quite good and easily available in Moscow: bread and ice cream. We were able to get bread every day and it was some of the best bread I have ever eaten. It was rich and dense, almost like eating a piece of meat. This was fortunate since in 3 weeks I did not see any meat in the markets that looked eatable. It was the middle of winter with two feet of snow everywhere and bitter cold temperatures, but it was not unusual to see people walking down the street with two or three small cups of ice cream in their hands. It must have been made with real cream and sugar because it was delicious and cost about half a cent using the black market exchange rate.

When walking in Moscow it was important to not smile. Nobody was smiling. If someone was smiling it was a sure give away that they were crazy, a dangerous foreigner, or demented. It was difficult to not smile, but I picked up that skill quickly. I was never fun though.



Black hole of the 1990s: The lawless Rishke Rynok market where people could buy guns and go into hiding

One day I was walking around Moscow and happened on the Rishke Rynok, a market. One of the things they had for sale were the Russian fur hats. Most of the hats were made of rabbit, but I was attracted to an interesting one made from coypu fur which I later found out is a large river rat. Some days later, I was told that the Rishke Rynok was frequented by the Moscow mafia and that my hat was one that they commonly wore. Maybe that is why no one ever questioned me or asked to see the passport that I did not have. God has mysterious ways of protecting His children.