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Letter from Moscow [1]

It is a confession for a historian of the Cold War to admit that he had never visited Russia until last week, and that is the case for me. I nearly went in 1975 but the “evil forces of capitalism” contrived to scrap the educational cruise ship on which my family and I were booked. I saw something of the Eastern bloc in Czechoslovakia and East Berlin in the 1980s; I had Russian friends, and even published on Russian subjects, but never having seen Russia for myself was a significant gap in my experience. And quite an experience it turned out to be. I did all the necessary things for any first-timer. I toured the Kremlin. I stood on Red Square. I visited Lenin in his mausoleum. I traveled through the Metro system with its platforms ornate with art from the old ideology. I bought a set of nesting dolls.

There were plenty of snapshots of the new Russia, fabulously wealthy men and women sashaying to impossibly expensive Bentleys, past old ladies scrabbling in the street to collect the Kopecs that young Russian tourists had tossed on the bronze plaque by the entrance to Red Square to bring themselves luck. Or was that a return of the old, old Russia? Tolstoy would have understood it for sure.

Seeking a Cold War site, I visited the location of KGB headquarters, the Lubyanka, which now houses the successor agency, the FSB. Outside, I found advertisements for the new James Bond movie. Popular culture seemed, in many ways, to be in sync with the west: the same inane Britney Spears song, the same perky ads for *High School Musical III*, and local knowledge of other cultural products on offer. One young Russian asked if I'd seen the movie called *W*, as though to confirm that it really had been possible to make a film about a sitting president. No one is holding their breath for an equivalent treatment of Medvedev or Putin. Once I'd played the game of decoding the familiar posters (so that's what “Simon Pegg” looks like in Cyrillic) the unfamiliar drew me in. It became obvious that there was no shortage of locally produced material. The big movie attraction is an epic about Russian naval history called *Admiral*, which is advertised all over the city with paraphernalia, including enormous Styrofoam reproductions of World War One-vintage sea-mines. The movie theatre near Pushkin Square had been converted into the prow of a battleship with plastic card. While in the 1980s such films regularly made it to western art-house screens, it seems unlikely that *Admiral* will steam into our cultural waters; it must surely be our loss.

The purpose of my trip was to meet people interested in the study of Public Diplomacy in Russia and take part in a couple of classes on public diplomacy at MGIMO, the international relations university, which graduates 80% of Russian diplomats. The sessions had been set up by the British Council office in Moscow, as a side project to an exchange conference they are running this week, and included two British PD scholars: Ali Fisher (who also blogs on this site) of Mappa Mundi Consulting and myself. Our MGIMO sessions were well attended and it was clear that the students had already thought a lot about soft power. Public Diplomacy seemed to be rather more of an unknown territory, but they took to the core concepts swiftly.

They were especially interested in on-line techniques. Here we had a surprise. While some sites – principally YouTube – were held in common, most were not. The Russian students spoke of their own equivalents of Facebook for social networking and other purposes. The Russian Facebook – we were told – is called V.Kontakte (meaning roughly "in contact"), it can be found at http://vkontakte.ru. Rather than evolving universal sites, which could become places of meeting between peoples, we had the sense of the web fragmenting into nationally or linguistically specific zones where one would tend to remain in the company of “people like me.“ These students knew nothing of Second Life or many of the other sites that some have touted as the future of on-line engagement for public diplomats. It struck us that for on-line work, as with most other aspects of public diplomacy, local knowledge will be key.

The students understood America's Soft Power – the beguiling free-for-all of Hollywood, fashion, and pop – but were hard pressed to consider exactly what Russia might offer to appeal to the world in response. They felt that Russian literature and high culture remained impressive and, moving to more ethical issues, believed that Russia should continue to associate itself with international law. They also felt that the Russian commitment to multi-polarity was attractive and that Russia might usefully encourage Europe to join in a political balancing of the United States. But there was considerable resentment of the way in which “America and its international media” were not merely promoting their way but denigrating Russia. Georgia was a case in point. To these students, the characterization of Russia's clash with Georgia this past summer was proof positive of the reach of American propaganda.

One surprise was the differing attitudes around the question of the end of the Cold War. In the course of my talk I mentioned the irony of American public diplomacy in the 1990s: the neglect of public diplomacy by Congress and the Clinton administration at the very moment that many people were giving it credit for helping bring the political change in Eastern Europe. It became obvious that these students had not spent much time thinking about external determinants for the political changes of the late 1980s and early 1990s. For them the Soviet Union collapsed for its own internal reasons, unconnected to its foreign policy, defense, and rearmament decisions. When I pushed the case – mentioned that Americans believe they won the Cold War and merely debate which of their policy decisions provided the “winning blow” – they were surprised. They simply do not see the story in terms of America's victory or Russia's defeat. The model adopted by these students was more that the Soviet Union attempted to create an ideal system, entered into competition with the United States, the system failed, and the Soviet Union stepped back from the competition – rather like a tennis player bowing out with a stomach cramp. Their model clearly left the path open for Russia to return to the competition and resume play, but this was not their intent. They seemed genuinely worried by talk of a return to a Cold War and asked with some anxiety about the likely foreign policy of America's next president. This mutual gap in perception is significant. Americans might do well to ask how victorious they really were if the defeated party does not acknowledge the loss. Both the United States and Russia need to be aware of each other’s dominant narratives if they are to understand the baggage that each brings into the international sphere. An enduring historical account of the end of the Cold War will need to reconcile both perspectives.

Whatever the role of Public Diplomacy in the evolution of the Cold War, it seemed plain that there was plenty of scope for continued dialogue, and that both East and West have much of importance to say to each other and much to listen to as well. The wholesale diversion of resources away from the U.S.-Russian engagement to focus disproportionately on the encounter with Islam seems unwise to say the least. These young Russians may not seek a new Cold War, but Cold Wars and hot wars have a habit of creeping up unbidden, and an absence of dialogue and emphasis on comfortable stereotype is one way in which they can

begin.