

Catching the “Volga Bug” by John A. Bernbaum

Political cartoonists sometimes have the ability to capture the nature of a political crisis in pictures and words that can be both humorous and insightful. Mike Peters of the *Dayton Daily News* drew a cartoon, which was later reprinted in *The Washington Post* on April 5, 1992, that involved a conversation between a Soviet astronaut and an old *Babushka* (grandmother). The exchange went as follows:

Astronaut: Comrade, I've been in space for a year. It's good to be back in Leningrad.

Babushka: Sorry. Leningrad is out. This is now St. Petersburg.

A: Leningrad out? But Lenin is the father of Communism.

B: Sorry. Communism is out. We are now capitalists.

A: Capitalists?! But how could Gorbachev allow this to happen?

B: Sorry. Gorbachev is out. He was overthrown by the hard-liners.

A: You mean the hard-liners are in charge?

B: No, the hard-liners are out. And Yeltsin took over.

A: You mean Yeltsin is the head of the Soviet Union?

B: No, the Soviet Union is out too.

A: No Soviet Union?! Quick, alert the Warsaw Pact!

B: . . . We need to talk.

The cartoon graphically portrayed the radical changes that occurred in the former Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991, particularly the last nine months of 1991. In

addition to being in an economic crisis, in which the economy experienced hyper-inflation and radical changes from a centrally planned control structure; a political crisis, in which the monopoly of power held by the Communist Party was broken, but without alternative structures in place; a social crisis, in which the supporting networks for the family were also dissolved; and a racial crisis in which the republics of the former Soviet Union were plagued with ethnic conflicts. Many republics declared their independence from Moscow. Most Western journalists and scholars missed another crisis, the moral and spiritual crisis caused by the collapse of Marxism-Leninism.

These interrelated crises put an enormous strain on the Russians, and the revolutionary changes taking place in their nation are without parallel in modern history. Unlike Germany and Japan after World War II, in which major changes also occurred, the Soviet Union was not a country defeated by its enemies. Its government, controlled by the Communist Party, imploded with hardly any violence or loss of lives. As was the case with the Communist Revolution of 1917, few people remained who were willing to defend the existing government that had lost its moral legitimacy.

A Sabbatical Opportunity

When the Board of Directors of the Christian College Coalition (now the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities) informed me that sabbaticals had become an option for staff members, my wife, Marge, and I initially considered taking our sabbatical in Costa Rica, where we had helped to create the Coalition's Latin American Studies Program. But when the Berlin Wall came down and

Coalition colleges and universities showed a great interest in student and faculty exchange programs in Eastern Europe and the USSR, I was asked to give leadership to these programs. In light of my new responsibilities, taking a semester to teach in the USSR seemed to be a worthwhile idea. We decided to avoid Moscow and Leningrad (St. Petersburg) because of their substantial populations of Westerners and their large size. Considering a wiser choice would be to live in a city further in the “heartland,” a city less affected by a Western presence, we hoped to get a truer picture of life in Russia during the country’s time of transition.

We made the decision to go to Nizhni Novgorod because of our relationship with the rector of Nizhni Novgorod State University (NNSU), Dr. Aleksander Khokhlov, who was a member of the Soviet delegation that visited the United States in the fall of 1990 as guests of the Coalition. During their tour of the States, Dr. Khokhlov stayed in our home for three days, and we became friends. On my first visit to the USSR in October 1990, Dr. Khokhlov arranged for me to visit his closed city of Gorky (along with Professor Stephen Hoffmann of Taylor University and Professor Orval Gingerich of Eastern Mennonite College). During the three-day visit, we negotiated protocols which established a sister relationship between NNSU and these two schools. We were in Gorky on October 22, 1990, when the city was renamed Nizhni Novgorod— another sign of the changes underway in Russia as many cities and streets were renamed and the former Soviet names removed, along with many statutes of Marx, Lenin and Stalin.

During my next two visits to Moscow and Dr. Khokhlov’s return visit to the States, we met each time and deepened our friendship. On October 3, 1991, I signed

a protocol in Washington, D.C., with Dr. Khokhlov and the Dean of the History Faculty at NNSU, Dr. Oleg Kolobov, that invited both Marge and me to teach at their university.

The Closed City

Nizhni Novgorod, the third largest city in the Russian Republic, is located 230 miles east of Moscow at the junction of the Volga and Oka Rivers. Historically it has considered the unofficial capital of the Volga River region. In previous centuries, it was a major international trading center that linked European Russia with its trading partners in Central Asia and the Far East. At the beginning of the twentieth century, when Russia's railroad system was destroyed in the First World War and river transport again became important, Nizhni Novgorod re-emerged as an important center of commerce. During the Soviet period, Nizhni Novgorod became a major base for defense-related industries, particularly the production of MIG aircraft and nuclear-powered submarines. As a result, the city was closed in 1932, which meant that no foreigners were allowed to enter it. The needs of the defense industry resulted in the development of numerous research centers in the city. During that time, the city housed thirteen post-secondary educational institutions, of which NNSU—with its eleven research institutes—was the most prestigious, ranking among the top five universities in Russia.

Nizhni Novgorod reminded me of Pittsburgh. Both cities are located at an important river junction, both have large industrial plants operating in their region, both are important commercial centers and both can boast of quality educational

and fine arts institutions. They are also both very livable cities with public parks, good restaurants, and sporting options.

The state university is situated in the upper city, located on high embankments overlooking the Oka River, while the industrial sections are across the river in a lower plateau. The main campus is on Gagarin Street, a principal thoroughfare named after the Soviet cosmonaut; a number of the university's eleven research institutes are scattered throughout the city. The university had 13,000 faculty, students and staff when we arrived in town and, like most Russian universities, student admission proved to be difficult. Competition for available openings in various departments was rigorous. Although NNSU was one of Russia's leading educational institutions, it stressed technological subjects without a full range of departments in the social sciences, arts and the humanities, as would be the case in a Western university. In the fall of 1992, departments of political science, sociology and social work were opened for the first time. A recently initiated law program existed, and the Department of Scientific Atheism was in the process of being converted to the Department of the History of Religion. Similar changes were occurring in the Economics and Business departments where courses in political economy from a Marxist-Leninist perspective were being replaced with courses on the free market system. In the natural sciences, NNSU was a national leader, especially in radio physics. In such a time of revolutionary change, the State Committee on Science and Higher Education designated NNSU as one of the lead institutions in educational reform. Maintaining this reputation of reform meant revising its curriculum along the lines of Western educational systems.

Teaching In Russia

As soon as we arrived in Nizhni Novgorod, we knew we had made the right decision. The university administrators worked diligently to accommodate us during a time of severe financial constraint, and they were gracious hosts, especially Dr. Khokhlov, a handsome, well-dressed executive, very popular on campus because of his leadership style and reputation. With his election to the Congress of Peoples' Deputies, he became well-known in leadership circles in Nizhni Novgorod and in Moscow, as well.

The International Relations Office at NNSU had responsibility for our well-being. Its Director, Galina Muravskaya, a petite woman of less than hundred pounds, was known as "The Colonel" because of her strong leadership skills. Her assistant, Alexander (Sasha) Lubavsky, and the student volunteers who worked in her office, helped orient us to the city. One student assigned to us, Valery Fokin, became a close personal friend and we later referred to him as our "Russian son." Ranked in the top level of students at the university, he was completely fluent in English. The university provided an apartment for us near the outskirts of the city, a thirty-minute bus ride from campus. The three-room apartment, nicely furnished, had recently been renovated. The university also provided a room in a special dorm on campus used for international students where a food service operated all day and prepared meals three times daily. We actually ate lunch there (the "big meal" of the day) five days a week and supper two-three times a week; this greatly alleviated the pressure on us to cook and fight the crowds at the market.

When I discussed the possibility of teaching at NNSU with Dr. Khokhlov, I suggested that I could teach a course in US-Russian relations or the history of the Cold War—topics in which I had some expertise. However, Dr. Khokhlov insisted that I offer a course on “Democracy and Moral Values,” a subject I had never taught. When I realized that the subject of this class was a priority for him, I determined to take on the challenge. I was invited to teach a ten-week course and was told that my course would be offered in the best classroom in the main conference hall of campus. The students who attended my class had to compete to get in and they were chosen based on their academic record and fluency in English, since no translators were going to be used. The conference room was filled for each session by fifty to sixty people; approximately one-third of the attendees were faculty and the rest were primarily undergraduate history majors and a few post-graduate students. The assigned classroom had a large U-shaped conference table and rows of seats along the walls. The students taking the course for credit sat at the conference table, while other students and faculty sat in the chairs surrounding the table. I soon learned that my inter-active teaching style and my use of hand motions and humor were new experiences for the students. Most classes at this university and others I visited on subsequent trips were straight lecture sessions in which the faculty member entered the room and started to lecture using notes or a textbook while students passively took notes. There was very little interaction and little or no time set aside for discussion.

During my first few classes, I would make a statement and then ask the students to respond, but no one did. Then I made an even more provocative

statement and got the same response. This frustrated me, until an older professor pulled me aside at the end of my second class and said “Dr. Bernbaum, no one has ever asked these students for their opinion on anything. Be patient with them.” Gradually they became involved in discussions with me in class and it proved to be one of the best teaching experiences of my life. I had complete freedom to share my faith in class and I made the point that I firmly believed in democracy, although my faith was not placed in it, but rather in my belief in God. I also shared my perspective that religion is not just private and personal, but should affect how we live our lives. This, together with my emphasis on the fact that all of us are religious and we will worship something, stirred up some good questions.

In discussing the American experience with democracy, the Declaration of Independence, and the U.S. Constitution, I worked hard to make parallels to the heated discussions underway in Moscow as the Russian parliament debated the future political structure of the country. I highlighted many of the issues being debated in Moscow and reported on the nightly news which were also issues our Founders wrestled with in the 1770s and 1780s: the proper role of government, states’ rights vs. a central federal authority, human rights, and religious freedom.

I was disappointed at the end of the course when I learned that many of the students and faculty, while very interested in American democracy and the U. S. constitution, seemed convinced that it would not work in their country. On her final exam, one student articulated the perspective of many of her classmates when she wrote the following: “Being realistic, I must say that Russia is not ready for democracy yet American-style democracy cannot be permitted to operate for it

would lead not just to a change in government, but to the disintegration of the state. Without a strong central government, our nation would not hold together.”

Teaching English Using the Gospels

Marge’s sabbatical involved teaching two sections of English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) and unlike my experience in which the history faculty supported the course I was offering, her Department of the History of Religion was filled with atheists who only a few years before were propagating the belief that religion was the “opium of the people.” She received no encouragement or interest from them.

Marge proved to be an excellent teacher, and her students loved her classes. She used parables and stories from the Gospels and had the students act out the stories in class. After giving a basic overview of the Christian faith, the structure of the Old and New Testaments, and the nature of God as described in Scripture, she had the students read passages from the Gospels on different themes, like Jesus’ birth narratives, followed by discussion on what they had learned. I thoroughly enjoyed her class sessions, as did the students, and she made many friendships with them that continued for years.

After our arrival in Nizhni Novgorod, a number of Christian missionaries who were meeting with Russian university students asked us if we would be willing to lead a Bible study on Wednesday nights. We agreed and they quickly posted signs on the campus announcing the first meeting at which, to our great surprise, fifty students showed up. The students were drawn to this evening session for two principal reasons: to learn more about Christianity and to gain more exposure to English-language speakers. Over the semester, the number of participants

diminished and averaged approximately twenty-five each week. Some of the students' questions involved matters we had rarely considered, such as: What do you think about the worship of Jesus' mother? How do you know that Christianity is superior to other religions? If we are forgiven by God, why not do more evil? If God is love, why is there a hell? Are monks and nuns who live in monasteries special people? Must we pray only from prepared texts or can we pray from our heart?

The students became special friends over the semester, and this added a richness to our experience as we learned about their lives and how they struggled to figure out how to live in a society going through such dramatic changes. They taught us so much and helped us to understand what life was like for them in Russia's third largest city. We never received hostile reactions to our open declarations of faith in Jesus Christ and always found at least a respectful response. Generally speaking the students demonstrated a substantial interest in Christianity, especially since its study had been forbidden for decades, but no quick willingness to believe its claims. Everyone, faculty and students, showed hesitance to believe anything after being lied to for so long.

Everyday Life for Ordinary Russians

Learning to live in an economic context with rapid currency value changes taught us the harsh reality that faced ordinary Russians every day. Shortly after we arrived in Nizhni Novgorod, we learned that the city's Central Bank had begun exchanging Western currency on Monday, March 2, 1992. The bank set its rate on Wednesday and no one had any idea what the rate would be a week later. On March 2-3, the exchange rate was ninety rubles per dollar; one week later it was sixty

rubles per dollar—a decrease of a third! On our first shopping trip to the downtown market, accompanied by our student guide Valery Fokin, we found plenty of food, but at much higher prices than normal. Ample supplies of meat, vegetables, fruits, milk and yogurt filled the markets, and we had everything we needed in an hour. We bought a pound of beef for \$.30, a medium-size cabbage for \$.05, and five apples for \$.44. No sales persons talked with customers, even routine small talk, and customer service appeared to be unknown in these stores.

A week later, Marge and I went to the market on our own for the first time. The weather was cold (28 degrees), so after standing in a line of twenty people to buy bread at our local bakery, we went back home for warmer clothes. We boarded a tram that took us one-third of the way downtown and then broke down. We waited in the cold for another tram to come and then headed to a coffee shop to buy some hot drinks and a fresh biscuit for warmth. We were proud of our ability to get the food we needed, but it dawned on us after our return that we spent four hours doing what would take twenty minutes at our local shopping center in Wheaton, Maryland.

After five weeks in Nizhni Novgorod, our frustration level began to grow. We realized that anything done nicely by Russian standards was for foreigners and a small number of the elite. The average Russian never had access to the good facilities which we visited with our hosts. No respect for the local citizens appeared to exist. Another adjustment we had to make concerned the normal functioning of the city. “Nothing works” was a phrase we used regularly. When we returned from a short trip to a village outside the city with the rector and his family, there was no

water—no hot or cold water, nothing! When I was invited to play volleyball with the faculty and staff, the gym had no electricity, so we played in a dimly lit room and changed clothes in a pitch-black locker room. The deteriorating conditions of the city were also striking. Roads had huge pot-holes and rivers of melting snow. All of the common areas around apartment buildings, even those where the elites lived, were filthy. Lines for food were also tiring. We often had to wait in lines of fifteen-twenty people to buy bread, standing in the cold on frozen sidewalks. Plenty of bread was available—the shelves were full—but there was no way to get into the store to get what was needed. Would it have been difficult to design a store where people could freely move in and out?

Our feeling of frustration with a growing sense of homesickness is a common occurrence for people who travel to foreign places, so being honest with each other helped us through this period. We soon overcame such feelings, and we learned to adjust to life in an economy going through radical changes. When gas prices went from one and one-half rubles per liter to six rubles in one jump on March 17, 1992, with the threat of a huge increase in the price of bus and tram passes two weeks later, we were no longer surprised. We shrugged it off like our neighbors did, who were such remarkable examples of durability and patience.

When offered teaching positions at NNSU, we were told we would be paid on the same level as Russian faculty. My salary amounted to 1,950 rubles per month (\$22), while Marge received 906 rubles per month (\$10). One month later, faculty at NNSU learned that they would only get fifty percent of their normal salaries because of a shortage of funds, along with a promise of a fifty percent bonus in April,

described as a one-time shot. Living in a situation where prices skyrocketed without warning and hyperinflation effectively wiped out any family savings startled us. Except for a small percentage of Communist Party elite, everyone lived from payday to payday. We did not see any starving people, but life was clearly difficult and survival had become an all-encompassing preoccupation. Wages for most people were four to eight times higher than they had been in the middle of 1990, but food and transportation costs went up by a factor of twenty to one hundred, so ordinary Russians got squeezed. As we got to know our Russian colleagues, we discovered that almost everyone spent between eighty and one hundred percent of their monthly income on food, which left little for clothes, shoes or other consumer items. Every payday created extreme tension. When the Central Bank in Moscow was unable to disburse monthly allotments to Nizhni's central bank, no one received a paycheck. This happened twice during our stay.

Sharing in the Lives of Our Russian Friends

As the first foreigners to serve as visiting professors at NNSU, we were unsure how the Russians we worked with would relate to us. We did not know if the average Russian we met would be hostile, especially in this formerly closed city, so we were surprised to find such warm receptivity. I clearly remember my first taxi ride in Nizhni Novgorod. After I tried to explain to the driver where I wanted to go in my poorly pronounced Russian, he said, "Are you an American?" When I smiled and said, "Yes," he said, "No cost—free ride for you!"

During our time in Nizhni, we learned much about personal hardships from our faculty colleagues and students, as well as from members of various churches

that we visited, and these exchanges deepened our commitment to Russia. Hearing stories of the problems people had faced for decades broke our hearts, and our affection for them and their country grew. One of our faculty colleagues told us her story. She began by explaining that their biggest problem in Russia was dependency on the state. She said there was no sense of individual responsibility, and most people waited for others to act on their behalf. The Soviet welfare state became a right, an entitlement, and it encouraged laziness. She insisted that people were not encouraged to take the initiative, and no salary incentives existed to encourage people to go beyond their duty as a teacher. In her opinion, the commitment to equality had become a monstrous thing and had created what she called a “gulag psychology.” She told us about her family and how an uncle, a priest, was arrested by the KGB and shot two days later. She said that the Stalinist days of terror are over, but a great pressure to conform remained. If a person wants to succeed, accusations of being greedy follow. She said that the damage of Stalin’s dictatorship was devastating and decades would be required to recover, but she had hope that such could eventually happen.

When we visited the local Baptist church in Nizhni Novgorod, we heard many stories of the persecution of Christians and the imprisonment of church leaders, with many sent to gulags in Siberia. As we heard these sagas, we were struck by the lack of anger or hatred toward those who so viciously attacked their church communities. Despite this painful history, they described their city as “Jerusalem on the Lower Volga” and were proud of how their parishioners worked together to support each other and refused to renounce their faith despite the consequences.

They told us how their church buildings were taken over by the Communist Party, sometimes destroyed and other times used as warehouses, but they continued to meet in homes. According to these dear people, the Communist Party could not eliminate religion, despite their best efforts to create a godless nation.

When we arrived in Nizhni Novgorod, there seemed to be considerable interest in religion, not only among the faculty and students, but also in the city as a whole. On the evening before Orthodox Easter, Marge and I went to the largest Orthodox cathedral in the city with a group of students and faculty. We arrived about 10:30 p.m. and joined a large crowd outside the church already filled to capacity an hour before the worship service began. We witnessed the arrival of Metropolitan Nikolai of Nizhni Novgorod, a member of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, and observed the liturgy and the lighting of candles in the crowded sanctuary, followed by the procession around the church building. We were surprised to see so many young people and young couples, but the use of Old Church Slavonic during the service meant that most worshippers had no idea what was being said. Yet their desire to experience this celebration of the resurrection, one of the most sacred events in the history of Christianity, encouraged us.

The next day, on Easter Sunday, the city government decided to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the local defense industry that produced anti-aircraft weapons. Part of the celebrations involved several “fly-byes” by Russian MIG-26s that are produced in the city, but never—until this time—publicly displayed. Six MIGs flew over the city in tight formations, but the first formation was stunning. The MIGs flew in the form of a Russian Orthodox cross, while the announcer gave

Easter greetings to the crowd gathered near the Kremlin (fortress) in downtown Nizhni. Later in the day, an Easter parade took place in the center of the city, led by the young, charismatic first governor of the Nizhni Novgorod region, Boris Nemtsov. Dressed in a Western-style business suit, but wearing a new pair of athletic shoes, he surprised us. When Marge and I saw him coming, we decided to greet him and introduce ourselves; his response was very friendly, and he spoke briefly with us in English. We had no idea at that time that he would later become a leading Russian political leader and a Deputy Prime Minister. After Yeltsin left power, Nemtsov became a vocal opponent of Vladimir Putin and was assassinated near the Moscow Kremlin in February 2015.

Reflections on Our Sabbatical

Looking back on our experience as faculty members in this formerly closed city, we definitely developed a love for the Russian people. Other foreigners later talked about getting the “Volga bug”—and we knew what they meant. Our hearts went out to the people we got to know, while our homesickness proved to be brief and soon forgotten. We developed deep friendships with the rector and his family, with faculty colleagues, and with many students. Our time in Nizhni Novgorod gave us insights into the lives of people who had come through such dramatic changes in their society and were not broken by these traumatic experiences.

Despite the economic crisis in this city and all over Russia, when we were invited into homes for dinner, our hosts treated us like royalty, and the food was not only attractively laid out, but also it tasted delicious. Sometimes we felt embarrassed to be offered such elaborate dinners when we knew the costs involved

to our hosts and all of the preparation they made in advance. Dinners often took hours, with times of sharing photographs or singing songs between various courses of the dinner—all of which the children also enjoyed as well. Russian hospitality proved to be unmatched by any we had ever experienced.

The interest in religion and moral values also went beyond our expectations. Marge and I had the opportunity to be interviewed on one of the most popular TV stations (Channel 3) in the city. Marina, the charismatic TV host, said the interview would be casual and spontaneous. After asking us about our large family and our impressions of her city, she then asked us to define “freedom” and then “love.” We used this opportunity to share our testimonies and how our lives were shaped by God’s love and our desire to love God in return. To our surprise, she asked follow-up questions and, when the program ended, the producer came down from the control room giving us a thumbs up sign and said, “This is what we need in our city and our country!” The TV interview, together with the showing of the film “Jesus of Nazareth” the night before, indicated that a great change in religious freedom was occurring in Russia. Marxism-Leninism had failed as a substitute religion and people wanted more than its empty promises.

In addition to numerous speaking opportunities at the university and in various forums in the city, one of most interesting challenges came through an invitation by the editor of *Stock Exchange: A Weekly Magazine of Nizhni Novgorod’s Businessmen* to write a weekly column on business and ethics. I enjoyed writing these essays, which were translated into Russian, and then circulated throughout the city. My columns had these titles: “Capitalism and Moral Values,” “Christianity’s

Contribution to Capitalism,” “Moral Principles for a Healthy Capitalism,” “How to Create Wealth,” “Essential Factors for Economic Growth,” and “Moral Values Make Practical Sense.” Unfortunately I got very little direct response to these essays, but I hoped that at least a few constructive seeds had been planted.

The sabbatical prepared me to give leadership to the Coalition’s program of developing student and faculty exchange programs in Russia. I had gained practical experience working in a quality Russian educational institution and a better understanding of the challenges that lay ahead as the country wrestled with its post-Communist transition. I learned more about how a Christian liberal arts college could bring a new approach to higher education, an approach that I thought would be attractive to Russian students and faculty. My vision for the Russian-American Christian University grew as a result of this sabbatical and increasingly my desire to see it established intensified.

In my summary report to the Coalition’s Board of Directors, I wrote that this sabbatical for Marge and me was one of the highlights of our lives. We gained insights about life under Marxist rule, learned about Russian education, discussed our nation’s experience with democracy, and also freely shared our faith with people who wanted to know about our beliefs. In addition, we returned home convinced that we must act now to build a Christian college in Moscow since no one knew how long this openness, this receptivity, would continue.

This essay is based on my 229-page daily journal and my nine-page report on the sabbatical to the CCCU's Board of Directors, May 29, 1992. For the full story of our experience living and working in Russia, see *Opening the Red Door: The Inside Story of Russia's First Liberal Arts University* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Academic Press, 2019).