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How to Turn Kalashnikovs Into Plowshares

By Marilyn Murray

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A Russian friend handed me his watch with the directive, "Here, time me." His hands flew as the old rifle disintegrated into bits and pieces of metal and wood scattered across the table. Then, like a movie played backward, the metal and wood returned to a Kalashnikov, the pride of the Soviet military, just as my friend threw both hands in the air signaling completion.

As I looked at the watch, I exclaimed, "Wow, you did that in just 50 seconds!"

He replied with a grin, "Well, when I was 16, I was the champion in my school with a record time of 32 seconds. Every Soviet teenager had to learn how to handle a Kalashnikov. It was part of an obligatory two-year military preparation class in every high school in the Soviet Union."

My friend and his wife had joined me, my granddaughter and her husband on a unique adventure exploring Bunker 42, a former military installation located in an underground

facility in Moscow. Buried 18 stories deep in the heart of the city, we explored tunnels that formerly housed top-level military personnel during the years of the Cold War. Now an interactive museum, it brought us face to face with the reality of the enormous tensions and possible consequences of this long-term conflict.

As a teenager growing up in Kansas in the 1950s, I was very aware that Communists and the Soviet Union were regarded as "the enemy." But in my community the threat of impending doom did not hang daily over my head or impinge upon my thoughts. While this was my experience, many people in other regions like New York or Washington might have had a different fear mentality.

Postwar United States was thriving with many citizens eagerly looking to the future with hope and a positive attitude. One area that contributed to this was the GI Bill that offered free college education to World War II veterans. Thousands of young men and women who would have never had the opportunity to leave their farms, small towns or big city ghettos eagerly accepted this exceptional chance for a different life. They weren't typical young, inexperienced graduates. They held the personal experiences of a battlefield and had survived. Consequently, they wove new ideas and challenges into the fabric of business, education, marketing, agriculture and technology with an energy that helped propel the United States into a prosperous era.

At the same time in Russia and other countries of the Soviet Union, people often lived in a "survival only" mode. Their memories of the devastation caused by the Great Patriotic War were still raw and fresh. Young families had lived in holes in the ground when whole villages were destroyed, and no available homes remained for returning veterans. Food and basic necessities were scarce. Resources that the government could have poured into making life more bearable for the populace instead went into industrialization and major military projects, especially nuclear research and production facilities.

It seemed as though Soviet citizens did not have time to catch their breath and recover from the major disaster of this monumental conflict with the Nazis before they were thrown headlong into an even longer assault on their safety and well-being. But this offensive became one that played relentless psychological warfare with their minds and spirits.

Cold War propaganda proclaiming the message of fear and pending disaster had an impact on almost every Soviet citizen. It was heard from radio and television, in schools, factories and offices, and in the streets. Signs, posters and slogans reminded every person that they were in danger of being invaded and to be suspicious and fearful of any outsider.

Children regularly had drills at school with gas masks. When I taught post-graduate classes at the Moscow State University of Psychology and Education, my classroom just happened to be dedicated to military psychology. The room was covered with posters about how to respond to trauma, and there were also two glass cases filled with gas masks. I was startled to see photos of children marching along with each little face covered by an olive-green mask. The incongruence of innocent girls and boys in contrast with such manifest objects of war was disconcerting.

When in Bunker 42, we were shown a powerful documentary detailing many aspects of the arms race between the Soviet Union and the United States. After the film ended, our guide

took us into a special room dominated by a huge screen with two stations situated below it featuring an elaborate array of monitors, switches and dials.

The guide then had my granddaughter and her husband don Soviet army jackets and caps and seated them in front of the intimidating displays. They soon were enmeshed in learning an elaborate sequence of turning keys and moving dials and switches. They were told that they were the people designated to respond instantly if an order arrived from the commander of the Soviet Union that the decision had been made to launch a nuclear attack on the United States.

As our guide was teaching them the launch sequence, my Russian friends and I stood in the center of the room looking up at the big screen, which was now playing what was supposed to represent a live feed from a U.S. city — probably Washington. It was a beautiful, sunny day with children going to school, adults kissing each other goodbye as they left for work, people walking down a busy street, teens playing baseball — it was a wonderful, normal day.

I was entranced by the scene, which looked so familiar to me. I could easily imagine my family in that scenario and was so caught up by it that I was almost unaware of all that was going on with my grandchildren. Then I quickly realized that they had received the deadly signal to set the nuclear launch cycle in motion.

In stunned silence I watched the happy scene on the screen dissolve and become absorbed by the blast of an enormous rocket. The missile arced and soared through vast expanses of space. Then suddenly, a massive explosion filled the sky and tears captured my eyes as a lethal mushroom cloud enveloped the world.

As I left that day, I remembered when a young woman in one of my classes about nine years ago spoke up and said: "When I learned this class was being taught by an American, I was very afraid. I was always taught that Americans only wanted to shoot me. You are the first American I have ever met, and I am so surprised that you are not my enemy but are now becoming my friend."

Today, I have beloved family and many intimate friends on both sides of the ocean. For me, the answer for peace is mutual love and respect — and to know that you are not my enemy, but my friend.

Marilyn Murray is an educator specializing in the treatment of trauma, abuse and deprivation, with more than 2,000 people attending her classes in Russia and other countries from the Commonwealth of Independent States over the past 10 years. Her second book, "The Murray Method," will be released in English and Russian this summer. You can read her interview with The Moscow Times here.

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