The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

How the Party Turned Russians Into Traitors

By Marilyn Murray

September 10, 2012



She was the daughter of a Russian government official who attended a Russian school. She was a faithful Pioneer and Komsomol member and lived the life of a typical Russian teenager except for one thing: She lived in Cuba. During one of our advanced classes, this beautiful woman named Lyudmila told of the conflicts her family experienced as they attempted to remain loyal Soviet citizens while living in a tropical country 9,600 kilometers from home.

Lyuda related their confusion as they became exposed to ideas that were nonexistent in the Soviet Union. After living in a one-room apartment with her brother and their parents, the experience of having her own room in Havana was an enormous treat for her. She loved the wonderful new sounds of Cuban and American music and was very excited when she had the opportunity to obtain large posters of John Travolta and Madonna to decorate her bedroom.

One afternoon after school, Lyuda invited a friend to visit her, and the friend was curious

about the posters she saw and the music she heard. The next day, Lyuda was called to the principal's office where the woman screamed at the teen, "How dare you! You are such a traitor. You will be severely criticized at the Komsomol meeting, and your parents will be sent away!"

Lyuda went home crying and told her father what had happened. Fortunately, he was supportive and went with her to see the school official where he defended Lyuda's actions. Luckily, this was in 1986, when perestroika was in full bloom. The issue was dropped without severe consequences.

It was during this period that Lyuda's father began to admit he was questioning the veracity of Soviet propaganda. During their years in Cuba, he traveled across the country and observed many buildings that were constructed by Americans prior to the 1962 blockade. He noted that these structures were exceptionally well built and had not decayed to the same degree as Russian buildings of similar age.

Her father realized the Soviets were lying about Russia being the most-advanced country in the world.

Ivan, another class member, smiled as he remembered his love of rock music as a kid. At age 13, he and his best friend concocted an amateur radio that was able to receive transmissions from foreign music stations. They became avid fans of the Beatles and were thrilled when one program promised free Beatles' records to the first 100 people who wrote in. The naive boys eagerly wrote a letter telling how much they loved the Beatles, signed it and listed their addresses. They quickly posted the letter with great expectations.

As they walked home from school the next day, they saw Ivan's friend's father waiting for them at their front door. His face was livid, and his eyes were flashing. He grabbed his son by the collar and marched him up the stairs as he roared, "Ivan, you go home!"

His friend's father just happened to be the director of their school. That morning he had received an urgent call and was told to report to the local KGB immediately. There he was shown the "traitorous" letter his son and Ivan had written. The school director nearly lost his job over the incident. His son was no longer allowed to have Ivan as a friend.

During the final hours of our class, a physician ended her presentation with an amazing story. After she graduated from medical school, Raisa was assigned to work on the medical staff of a very large factory. The plant had a retreat center in another region, and their management and professionals were encouraged to spend their vacation time in this place.

Raisa and four of her colleagues — two women and two men — readily accepted this offer of a free holiday. When they arrived at the campground, the weather was exceptionally warm and cups of cool water were most welcome. But by evening, all five complained of severe stomach cramps and began a steady stream of trips to the outdoor latrine. This facility was simply four walls and a roof covering four holes in the ground. Women and men were to alternate occupying the space.

"At first we smiled weakly and greeted one another on the path from our rooms to the out-house," Raisa said, "but by the middle of the night, we were nearly knocking each other over

and it didn't matter who was in there, men or women. It became a hideous nightmare and an absolutely unbelievable mess. We were all literally covered in excrement!"

Fortunately, none of them died, and when they returned to the factory they discussed the situation. As idealistic Komsomol members and health professionals, they sincerely believed that the government officials who were in charge of the factory would want to know that the water at their retreat center was polluted and very dangerous for the factory employees.

So, they crafted a carefully worded, respectful letter reporting the contaminated water and their concern as doctors regarding the health of the factory's employees. Raisa related that they then foolishly signed their names and mailed the letter.

Within two days, they each received an official summons to report immediately to Communist Party headquarters.

"I never will forget this time of utter humiliation," Raisa said. "We had to stand and face a long table where five Communist Party officials sat scowling at us. The chairman leapt from his chair and began frantically waving our letter. His voice erupted in a torrent of vile abuse aimed directly at our heads and hearts. 'Who do you think you are accusing the factory management of running an unhealthy facility? That factory is owned by the Soviet government, and when you accuse the management, you accuse the government. And you accuse the government, you accuse the Party! Are you so stupid that you do not understand that the Party never makes a mistake?'"

As he raged, his face turned crimson and the veins in his neck bulged with his venom, "We don't care if you defecate all over yourselves and each other. The Party is never wrong!"

At this point in her story, Raisa started laughing, and soon the whole class began to giggle and chuckle until we felt we were either going to collapse in laughter or break down in tears. The absurdity of the belief that maintaining an image of a "perfect, infallible Communist Party system" was far more crucial than human lives and that ordinary people would be deemed "traitors" for doing ordinary things was overwhelming. In the end, we also cried.

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.

Related articles:

- Putin Takes Elections Back To the U.S.S.R.
- Q&A: Mike Tyson's 'Mom' Peers Into the Russian Mind
- The Lessons of 1812 for Today

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/09/10/how-the-party-turned-russians-into-traitors-a17671