

Field Notes from a Revolution - an Introduction and Explanation

August 1991 witnessed a remarkable series of events in Moscow when the formidable Communist Empire vanished almost without a whimper. Leona and I were in the Soviet Union at the time and had the privilege of being at the center of events, in fact, inside the barricades at the Russian White House on the last night of the coup.

Our presence was part of a series of 12 visits to the Soviet Union between August 1989 and April 1992. There were many later trips to the region, specifically to Lithuania with regard to LCC International University and intermittent visits to various areas of the former Soviet Union – but these reports cover the indicated period.

The series of “Trip Reports” documents 10 of those visits (Trips #3 and #11 did not result in reports). The reports were written immediately following each visit with the intention to document my experiences and record my impressions but written in a style where the reports could be circulated to interested friends – and without concern about wider distribution. For the latter reason the reports were written in a manner where individuals would not be compromised and where the observations were intended for a larger audience. This style of writing resulted in a series of in-the-moment reports that did not require editing at this later stage – so the reports are presented entirely in their original form. They constitute an ongoing conversation with the rapidly changing Soviet Government and society – but written when I could not know the outcome of future events.

Given that some of the references in the reports resulted in later events or are made more useful by context, I have added and will continue to add comments in italics to explain or comment on the event – but these comments are clearly identified as later interventions.

An unusual series of events precipitated my presence in the Soviet Union. My parents were both born in southern Russia and both had the good fortune to escape to safety in the West albeit in especially challenging circumstances in the case of my mother and that is a story documented elsewhere on this website. Given that difficult background you had no interest in returning to “Russia” and certainly not in providing any assistance. I met a senior diplomat from the Soviet Embassy in Washington in Buenos Aires in January 1989 at a YPO (Young Presidents Organization) Conference. He was a senior member of the Soviet Embassy in Washington DC, highly educated and represented the Institute of Canadian and American Studies. Given my background he encouraged me to return to the Soviet Union (do not blame the people – blame the system) and indicated that the Soviet Union was changing and given my background stated that I could make a contribution. Specifically, he stated that the Soviet Union would attempt to develop a market system and would likely fail. The reasons indicated were that after 70 years there was no sense of entrepreneurship (The large Western companies are no better than our existing monopolies – his view) and secondly that a market system required Trust – something that no longer existed in Soviet society. He stated that as a Business entrepreneur and as a Christian I had something to offer. This perspective for my initial visit resulted in a series of four Conferences on “Business and Ethics” from a Christian perspective. The national scope of these conferences resulted in the unusual range of friends, contacts and access to various regions of the Soviet Union.

Later that spring I would meet Johannes Reimer of Germany. Reimer was a recent émigré from the Soviet Empire and currently active in various Christian initiatives back into the Soviet system. He is an entrepreneur in his own right, very well connected and became my guide, my friend and my collaborator. He was part of the initial trips and played a continuous role throughout this period.

Reimer provided some unusual contacts at high Government levels, church contacts and in the underground. I had a friend from my Harvard days (1967) when Vitaly Ozira showed up in our classes. He was registered at the School of Government at Harvard but actually took his classes in the Business School. We would connect later in Bangladesh and when my adventure started in the Soviet Union he became an invaluable interlocutor into the system. He was part of the inner circle of economists working with Gorbachev to change the Soviet system and from that position introduced me to many interesting leaders and provided access into the Kremlin and other places.

There were many other important individuals who deserve my thanks for help and access and many of them are identified in these reports.

“Field Notes from a Revolution” was written entirely by myself with the exception of Trip Report #1 when we travelled as a group and another person drafted the report. These reports may be useful as material at the University level since they are entirely true as to facts, were written within days of events and were not based on merging later interviews with individuals who were observers or were part of the events. From the perspective of the reader it should be noted that Reports #1, #2, and #4 are essentially reporting with plenty of detail. The very last part of Report #5 begins to reflect on what is being experienced and later reports shift increasingly to interpretation and reflection as the accumulation of time and experience begin to create the basis for interpretation. The latter reports are predominantly reflection and from that perspective may be more interesting to the reader.

In addition to the Trip Reports there are a number of articles or essays written later in a style where the facts remain intact but they are more of an attempt place an event or situation into the larger context of the momentous changes that were happening around me. The introduction to each item provides some degree of context. These latter articles may be more entertaining reading but were written from a different perspective than the immediacy of the moment.

A further series are the various articles that relate to the development of LCC International University in Lithuania – a remarkable and continuing project that developed out of the events and contacts made during the earlier visits. Those articles are presented separately in a section of the website under LCC International University. They cover a much longer period but in a different manner speak more to the experiences of one society navigating the post-Soviet period plus the efforts and experiences in creating and sustaining a University in a sometimes hostile environment.

The sum total of these articles constitutes a perspective on the collapse of the Soviet Union and some of the experiences in creating a post-Soviet society. Many of the problems encountered by Russia, Ukraine and other places in their effort to become new societies are evident in my earlier experiences and observations.

I welcome responses to this series of reports and articles.