A Student in Moscow, 1966

Last year, despite the new chill between the two superpowers, at least 350 American scholars and students traveled to the Soviet Union to pursue their researches. Their presence is no longer a novelty. But 16 years ago, when Sovietologist Sheila Fitzpatrick, then a graduate student, arrived in Moscow, visiting Western scholars were rare, and the Soviets were unaccustomed to dealing with such inquisitive foreigners. Her first sojourn in Moscow produced some enlightening, often comical moments.

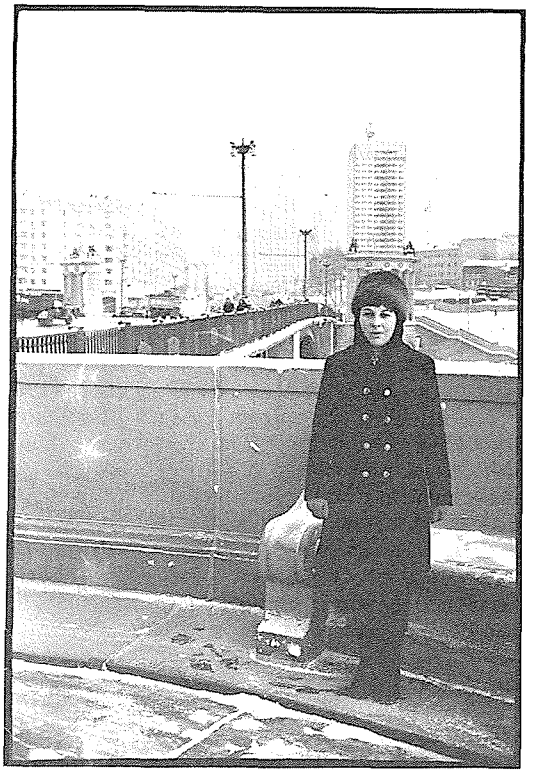
by Sheila Fitzpatrick

Moscow is a boring town for most of its foreign residents. Diplomats generally see only other diplomats; journalists can do little but collect press releases from official or, occasionally, dissident sources. The city's eight million natives may not find it much more exciting.

For exchange students, it is different. They have all the privileges of foreigners, but, because they share dormitories with Russian students and speak the language, they can escape the insularity of life in a foreign ghetto. For most of them, the year in Moscow is a great adventure. I have returned many times since 1966 as a professor, but none of my visits has matched in intensity that first encounter as a graduate student.

No other group of outsiders—except, perhaps, retired KGB spies (e.g., Kim Philby, the British "mole"), foreign-born wives of Russians, and other stigmatized permanent residents—can mix so freely in Russian life as the students. The notorious perils and pitfalls of Moscow, though real up to a point, are not nearly as fearsome as they have been painted. The "closed society" opens up enough for the exchange students to make friends with Russians. The KGB presence, in the form of real and imagined bugging, tailing, and general snooping, adds an exotic touch without being a real threat. And the Soviet bureaucracy, obstructive as it is, can often be outwitted or worn down by persistence.

Zhizn'-bor'ba—"life is struggle," as the Russians say. But it is a struggle that often pays off for the foreign students in knowledge and pleasure. And one's fate is never really in jeopardy. The worst that usually happens to an exchange student (or a diplomat, or a journalist) is to be declared *persona non grata* after some frame-up or scandal, and sent home.



Sheila Fitzpatrick in Moscow during her student days. In the background, a government office building, one of the "wedding cake" skyscrapers of the Stalin era.

Moscow is a gray city, with long winters and vast, forbidding city squares, created in the monumentalist spirit of the Stalinist 1930s and '40s. The half dozen skyscrapers erected during Stalin's last years, all in a nearly identical grandiose wedding-cake style, dominate the skyline, towering incongruously over small onion-domed churches and modest two-story wooden houses.

In the Moscow Metro, the city's pride, old peasant women in white aprons sell ice cream and flowers. Some subway stations are done in palatial style, with chandeliers and murals. The Metro, a womb-like retreat from the fierce winter above, makes it possible for a foreigner to believe that the rigors of Moscow life can be survived.

I was an Australian doctoral student in Soviet history at Oxford when I first went to Moscow as an exchange student in 1966. The Soviets saw the purpose of such exchanges as promoting "friendship between our two peoples" *(druzhba narodov)*. The phrase was repeated endlessly. But the Cold War was still icy enough during the late 1960s to make such sentiments sound insincere, even when they were not.

Mutual suspicion flourished, especially over the use of the exchange for

espionage purposes. Each year, a few students ran into trouble for distributing "religious propaganda" (Bibles), smuggling icons, or selling foreign currency to Russians, and we were told horror stories about sexual entrapment (called *provokatsiya*), which the KGB purportedly employed to blackmail students. It was a new world for most of us. Probably even the spies in our group, if there were any, found it bizarre.

Most Western officials went along with the "peace and friendship" rhetoric, though without noticeable enthusiasm. The Americans also liked the idea of exposing the subject populations of communist countries to democratic values. The British, however, seemed too world-weary to press this view on their exchange students.

The officials who briefed us in London implied that we were setting off on an obstacle course rather than a culture-bearing mission.

Not even rhetorical peace and friendship existed between Western and Soviet historians during the mid-'60s. In Soviet eyes, Western scholars who wrote about the post-1917 period were virtually all Cold Warriors and "bourgeois falsifiers." Western historians were scarcely more flattering about their Soviet counterparts ("party hacks") and viewed even the factual content of their publications with suspicion.

From my personal vantage point, relations seemed particularly bad. Because he had translated *Doctor Zhivago* into English, my Oxford adviser was ominously referred to in the Soviet press as "the not unknown Max Hayward." (Actually, he was totally unknown to Soviet readers, apart from these sinister references.) My college, St. Antony's, was often described in the Soviet press as a nest of spies, and one of its Fellows claimed that the KGB had stolen his research notes—from a train in Switzerland, no less—and given them to a Soviet scholar. Such were the joys of Sovietology 16 years ago.

The subject of my doctoral dissertation was Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875–1933), an Old Bolshevik, a prolific writer on literary and other subjects before and after the October Revolution, and the first People's Commissar of Enlightenment (meaning Minister of Education and Culture) in Soviet Russia.*

I chose Lunacharsky, sometimes described as "a Bolshevik among intellectuals, and an intellectual among Bolsheviks," because of his position as an intermediary between the old Russian intelligentsia and the new Soviet regime during the 1920s. There was also something intriguing about a Bolshevik who disliked politics, wrote plays in his spare time, and was known for his exuberant good nature, tender-heartedness, and unsparing goodwill.

The other good thing about Lunacharsky was that he had published so

*The dissertation became my first book, published by Cambridge University Press as *The Commissariat of Enlightenment* in 1971. I was proud of that title, which (at least to me) conveys irony in English while being totally innocuous translated back into Russian. This strikes me as an apt example of the real spirit of the cultural exchanges in those years.

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much on everything from religion to foreign affairs that I already had enough material for a thesis, even if Moscow proved to be a disaster.

I arrived in Moscow on a clear, chilly day in the autumn of 1966, having just acquired a husband (who was studying in Tokyo), a new passport (British), and a Soviet visa. I was in the mood for more great leaps forward.

Why, I thought, should I give my topic as "Lunacharsky as Literary Critic," when I was really interested in Lunacharsky as a political and governmental figure?

Why not request access to the Soviet archives, even if everyone said that would prove impossible?

For that matter, why not demand interviews with Lunacharsky's surviving colleagues and family members?

Why not, while I was at it, ask for the moon?

Big Brother Blinks

I laid out these ideas at the first meeting with my Soviet adviser, Professor Aleksandr Ivanovich Ovcharenko of the Philological School of Moscow State University. Making no objection and almost no comment, quizzical eyebrow slightly raised, Aleksandr Ivanovich began neatly rewriting my draft proposal (typewriters were scarce). He changed my title, removing some of the ambiguity I had cautiously inserted, and added the Central Party Archives, which are not always accessible even to Soviet historians, to my list of requested sources.

I was astonished by my good fortune, and later spent hours looking for a deeper meaning. This is a habit among foreigners in Russia, who tend to assume that everything that happens to them is known or even planned by higher authorities.

I soon found out that my adviser's approval was only the beginning of the battle. The proposal as a whole had to be processed by Moscow University's *Inotdel*, the department in charge of foreigners. Then each separate request had to be sent to the Ministry of Higher Education, which lackadaisically forwarded it to the institution concerned. The whole thing took months, and repeated refusals of archival requests (as in my case) were common. The trick was always to have something in reserve — an appeal to a higher official, a supplementary request, another office to be consulted—to prevent any refusal becoming final.

Groping in the Dark

The Central Party Archives were my top priority, not for such tantalizing but inaccessible documents as Politburo minutes or Stalin's personal papers but for the far less sensitive Lunacharsky collection. But my approaches through normal bureaucratic channels were foundering, and I could not call on my adviser, Professor Ovcharenko, for help. (He was in China as a member of the last Soviet-Chinese Friendship delegation, which, we later learned, was suffering grievous abuse at the hands of the young *Internationale*-singing Red Guards of China's Cultural Revolution, then at its peak.) I decided to break the rules and go in person to the Institute of Marxism-Leninism, where the archives were kept.

My arrival alarmed the militiaman on guard at the entrance, but he let me into the lobby, where I doggedly explained to a succession of worried secretaries that I was a foreigner and an official "guest of the Soviet Union" (which I was, more or less) and wanted to speak with the director.

They told me he was busy. I said I could wait. Finally, they summoned a deputy director, to whom I put my case.

As I was speaking, he unexpectedly interrupted. "Are you a Communist Party member?" he asked. I said: "Of course not, I'm a foreigner." That was tactlessly phrased, but, ignoring the implied insult to international communism, he was already stepping back a pace to deliver his exit line. "If you are not a member of the Party, how can we allow you to work in the Party Archives?" he boomed. I acknowledged defeat and left quietly.

This episode earned me a scolding from Moscow University's *Inotdel*. At the same time, however, *Inotdel* seemed to step up its own efforts to get me into the Central Soviet Government Archives. Oddly, nobody suggested that I should be a member of the Soviet government to qualify.

The permission finally came just before the New Year, three months after my original request.

It was a day of great triumph when I made my first appearance at a handsome, pre-Revolutionary building on Bolshaya Pirogovskaya, home of the government archives. Foreigners were restricted to their own reading room, one with big double windows, tall, old-fashioned cupboards for storing files, and an atmosphere of almost unnatural calm imparted by its custodian, the melancholy and taciturn Viktor Borisovich. I felt that I had walked onto a stage set for a Chekhov play.

I had never set foot in an archive before—any archive—though I tried to conceal this. But, in any case, nothing could have prepared me for my Soviet experience. I was told, for example, that I could order Xerox or microfilm copies, but not of a complete page of a file nor from any two

consecutive pages!

The procedure for ordering the files themselves was even stranger. When I first arrived, my consultant, a friendly woman with the gentle manners of the old intelligentsia, asked me what files I wished to see. Rather puzzled, I said that I would tell her when I had looked at a catalogue. She answered that there was no catalogue. I should tell her what I wanted to know, and she would look for the appropriate archival material.

"My" Commissariat and Yours

This was a real problem. Like everyone else, I was interested in the *ostrye voprosy*, "thorny issues" in Soviet history ranging from big questions like the forced collectivization of agriculture during the 1930s to smaller ones like Lunacharsky's resignation from the Commissariat of Enlightenment in 1929.

Among Soviet scholars, these were (and still are) extremely delicate matters. To present a list of such issues probably would have reduced my kind consultant to tears or, in a person of different temperament, provoked one of those sincere but infuriating lectures on Russia's suffering during the Second World War, which are supposed to shame foreigners into silence.

A better course, obviously, was to ask for material of the Commissariat of Enlightenment by category: orders, circulars, correspondence, and minutes. But that, too, had its difficulties for me. Having led a comparatively sheltered life, I had very little idea of how a government bureaucracy works, and thus, as I realized with rising panic, of what kinds of documents one was likely to generate.

I was lucky. My consultant, wracking her brains for something appropriate to my apparently nebulous interests, mentioned "protocols." I jumped at the suggestion, although I was not at all sure what protocols were.

They turned out to be summaries of the weekly meetings of the Commissariat's directorate. They started in 1918, when Lunacharsky and his fellow revolutionaries felt a sense of wonder and astonishment at being in power (like my own feelings, 50 years later, at being in the Soviet archives). They continued throughout the 1920s, during which time Lunacharsky & Co. learned some practical lessons about the workings of bureaucracy and government. So, at one remove, did I.

I took my research very personally at this stage of my career. Like most biographers, I became attached to my subject. Like most institutional historians, I also tended to take the side of "my" Commissariat in its conflicts with other Soviet institutions over policy and political turf.

But I had more than the normal reasons for personal involvement in that first year of serious research. I had found myself a foster family in Moscow.

Becoming a "Non-Person"

Before I went to the Soviet Union, I was not sure if it would be possible to make friends or scholarly contacts, given the nation's Stalinist heritage and its official suspicion of foreigners. But like many foreign students (except Africans, Asians, and Arabs, who are victims of prejudice), I quickly found out that it was easy to make friends in the Soviet Union. It was much easier, in fact, than for a foreigner to make friends in Britain or the United States, where the natives may be unsuspicious but are

probably also uninterested.

I also found out, to my surprise, that it was possible to do oral history in the Soviet Union, even if the subject was a controversial figure such as Lunacharsky.

During the 1930s, a whole galaxy of political and cultural leaders of the previous decade — men such as the Old Bolsheviks Nikolai Bukharin and Grigori Zinoviev, the poet Osip Mandelshtam, and the theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold—fell victim to Stalin's terror and became "non-persons."* Their names could not be mentioned in print, their works could not be published, and their existing books were removed from library shelves. Others (including Lunacharsky) escaped this fate, but their reputations were tainted, and their works sank into obscurity.

Bolshevik Ghosts

But the situation was never as thoroughly Orwellian as it might have been. The Lenin Library in Moscow, for example, had its librarians ink out the names of "non-persons" such as Trotsky and Zinoviev in its books, but one could still read them, especially when the librarians used their watered-down purple ink rather than India ink.

In real life, moreover, discarded Soviet politicians and disgraced writers and scientists leave wives, children, and indeed whole family circles of relatives, disciples, and former aides and secretaries who are eager to restore their man's good name. In the case of the purge victims, the families had their chance after Khrushchev denounced Stalin's policies in his "Secret Speech" to the 20th Party Congress in 1956. In its wake, many who had died during the Great Purge of 1937–38 were "rehabilitated," and Old Bolsheviks such as Lunacharsky had their tarnished reputations restored to luster.

Avoiding Old Canards

Complicated human problems surrounded the rehabilitations. Was the widow of a victim entitled to reclaim all or part of the apartment she had been evicted from upon his arrest some 20 years before? There were also formalities to be observed. When the Lenin Library found that the ink covering the names of "non-persons" in its books could not be erased, it had librarians rewrite all the names in the margin.

The important thing for the families was to elicit more formal tokens of recognition of their man's accomplishment and merit, such as newspaper articles and memorial meetings on his birthday or publication of excerpts from his letters.

Some even succeeded in getting plaques installed outside their old apartments or elsewhere. The House of Government, a sinister gray monster diagonally across the Moscow River from the Kremlin, sprouted enough plaques to revive old memories of its ghastly depopulation in 1937–38.

Other families aimed higher, seeking permission to convert the family apartment into a museum celebrating its distinguished former inhabitant. But this was exceptionally difficult to engineer because Moscow had (and has) a severe housing shortage that the authorities were reluctant to exacerbate.

The best memorial of all was publication of a writer's neglected or previously unpublished novels or of a

*Stalin's Great Purge of 1937–38 took a severe toll of the Soviet elite and Communist Party members. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, were arrested and sent to labor camps, where many perished.

politician's speeches and articles. The most enterprising families were soon gathering material for a *Selected* or, better still, a complete *Collected Works*. The publication of these collections, often in many volumes, required exhaustive archival and bibliographical work. Entirely new scholarly industries were generated in the process.

Lunacharsky's stock rose dramatically during the 1960s, when research for his eight-volume *Works* got underway. This was due in no small part to the efforts of his devoted and energetic daughter, Irina Anatolyevna Lunacharskaya. By the time I arrived in Moscow, there was already a generic name for people who, like me, studied Lunacharsky: We were *lunacharskovedy*.

It was not difficult for me to meet Irina Anatolyevna, then a woman in her 40s, since she herself wanted to meet and keep tabs on all the Lunacharsky scholars. The difficulty was not to be intimidated by her. She was small, beautiful, elegantly dressed, worldly, opinionated, and incredibly voluble. I was just small.

Her grand apartment on Gorky Street, which she had acquired when the Lunacharsky Museum Apartment was established, contained a remarkable collection of books, portraits, other *lunacharskiana*, old china, and imposing pieces of late Imperial furniture.

The telephone rang constantly. Irina Anatolyevna was and is a true virtuoso of the telephone. Charming, insistent, high-minded, shrewd, and admonitory by turns, her voice flows effortlessly and confidently to the final upward inflection, *"Dogovorilis'?"* (That's settled, then?). Then the receiver clunks down.

It is difficult at the best of times to

Anatoly Lunacharsky (right) and his brother-in-law and literary secretary, Igor Aleksandrovich Sats, in Lunacharsky's study in 1924.

hold one's own in conversation with Irina; on the telephone, it is simply impossible.

I grew very fond of Irina Anatolyevna, despite the problems that sometimes arose on the academic side of our relationship. The world of rehabilitative scholarship has its own rules and conventions, not all of which are easily accommodated by a Western scholar. It is unacceptable, for example, to revive old canards about Lunacharsky's philosophical "heresies," or to fail to emphasize how highly Lenin regarded him after 1917, or to cite quotations that might provide ammunition for his scholarly critics.

Like many Old Bolsheviks, Lunacharsky married twice and left two family circles, each with its own custodial interest in his legacy. To associate with both, I found, could be difficult. It was equally awkward to stray into the circles of other great men (Maksim Gorky, say), not because of any hostility among the groups but because it suggested lack of loyalty to one's own and even a kind of historical promiscuity.

Tears in the Archives

When I erred, Irina would scold me. She did this to other *lunacharskovedy*, but it had a very familial touch in my case. In my contacts with the Lunacharsky family in general, I was always struck by how little they treated me as a foreigner and how much they treated me as a child, someone in need of instruction and perhaps discipline, but also of love and protection.

Many of the other exchange students found the same attitude among their Soviet friends, and I even encountered it in the archives. Once, when I burst into tears of anger and frustration at being denied some of the archival material I wanted, a senior official reproached me. "Grown-ups don't cry," he said. But, after a moment of indecision, he picked up the phone. I got the material. (The same instinct, I suppose, leads careworn Soviet adults to give up their seats in buses to healthy 10-year-olds. Soviet children have a good life.)

No More Cloaks and Daggers

The protective attitude was most marked in the case of one of Irina Anatolyevna's favorite relatives, her uncle Igor Aleksandrovich Sats, who had been Lunacharsky's brother-in-law and also his literary secretary and confidant. When I first met him, Igor Aleksandrovich was one of the editors of the lively and often controversial literary journal, *Novyi Mir*. He had a sharp wit, great intelligence, and a dramatic Jewish face, sardonic, stubborn, melancholy, and gentle by turns.

Toward the end of that first year, I would sometimes go to Igor Aleksandrovich's place and stay all day, listening to whatever he chose to talk about. Often it was Lunacharsky, but sometimes it was Liszt's piano technique or the Smolensk Front in 1942. When I asked questions about people and events mentioned in the archives I was reading, he would give vivid thumbnail characterizations, sometimes unquotable.

This often happened when I was accompanying him on errands, picking up the family laundry and buying groceries. For me, he used to buy *ryazhenka*, a kind of yogurt that he said children particularly liked.

This all seemed quite normal to him, for he attracted a lot of strays and was particularly fond of children and women. To me, it did not seem normal. I regarded Igor Aleksan-

drovich as a kind of miracle and wondered what I had done to deserve him. Later, I got used to the idea that he had adopted me, and I regarded him as a lately acquired parent. He died in 1980.

In the end, I did not write Lunacharsky's biography, disappointing Irina Anatoyevna. But I later wrote about the Soviet's own "Cultural Revolution"—no similarity to the events in China, Professor Ovcharenko unconvincingly assured me—that had driven Lunacharsky from the Commissariat of Enlightenment in 1929. (The book was *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–31*, published in 1978.)

These days, as three visits since 1977 have shown me, foreign scholars in Moscow have a better deal. Working conditions have improved, and procedures have become more (if not totally) Western. There is a new social science research library, INION, which is a pleasure to work in.

Some things have not changed. For the last few years, I have had a running battle with the Lenin Library because of its unwillingness to produce Moscow telephone directories for the late 1930s. They suspect, quite rightly, that I might use the directories for the "dubious" purpose of estimating the number of purge victims. The archives may still be difficult to get into, but more Americans work there now, and there is less mutual incomprehension between archivists and foreigners. Relations between Western and Soviet scholars have warmed somewhat, partly because of the spectacular improvement in the quality of Soviet writing on Soviet history, and partly because the Soviets no longer automatically dismiss Western scholarship out of hand.

As a visiting professor, I have graduated from the Moscow University dormitories to the slightly seedy red plush of the Academy of Sciences Hotel, and my knowledge of life among exchange students today comes secondhand. But I gather that the old cloak-and-dagger excitement is less pervasive, and the foreign students seem to have stopped worrying that every proposition from a Russian may be a *provokatsiya*.

Of course, I think Moscow was more fun in the bad old days, before enlightened administrators started restoring historic churches properly, and before Muscovites began taking to the streets in droves of little Fiats, making their city look almost like any other European metropolis at rush hour. But that kind of reactionary nostalgia is to be expected from people who write memoirs.