

When the Russians Came to Town: Reflections on Communism and Socialism

In the mid-1980s, when Ronald Reagan was president and the Soviet Union was fighting a losing battle in Afghanistan, my wife and I were running a bed and breakfast in Waynesville, North Carolina. One day, an executive from the Dayco Corporation, a manufacturer of rubber tubes and automotive hoses in the adjoining town of Hazelwood, called to ask if we could house a team of five workers from the Soviet Union who were coming to learn some of Dayco's manufacturing methods. They needed three rooms for a month during the off-season. Given the state of our finances, I gladly obliged.

To prepare for this visit, I visited the public library and boned up on life in the Soviet Union. Though this learning session took place over thirty years ago, I remember reading that the typical factory worker in Communist Russia lived in an apartment, was married, had only one child, and did not own a car. I remember those details because they fitted our visitors like a tailored shirt.

Our Soviets arrived in November. The Dayco representative, a man of Russian descent who spoke the language, then informed me that the Russians had few obligations after hours at the plant, that my wife and I were free to entertain them and introduce them to small-town America, and that Dayco would reimburse some of the costs of that entertainment.

This Russian team consisted of four men who worked in a factory in Ufa in Bashkortostan and a woman from Moscow who served as their translator and, who was, I presumed, their Soviet handler. Four of the five had only one child – the fifth was newly married – all of them lived in apartments, and

only the translator owned a car.

Here were some of the “entertainments” that intrigued our Russian visitors:

The youngest, a man in his mid-20s, accompanied me early on to Ingles, our local grocery store. He spotted coconuts in the produce section and seemed so intrigued that I bought one. When we arrived home, the two of us tried to hammer open the coconut. Any amateur at such a task, as I was, can guess what happened. We ended up with spilt juice, shards of coconut, and a look of chagrin on the young man’s face.

Once I needed some paint from Lowe’s, the home improvement store, and took the Russian men with me. What should have been a short trip turned into an odyssey, as the men roamed the store marveling over lawn mowers and weed eaters, the vast variety of paints, the precision tools, and all sorts of odds and ends I had never before noticed.

On another excursion, we traveled to nearby Cherokee. The Russians dutifully toured the Cherokee museum, but what really caught their attention were the novelty shops, a block of stores selling everything from rubber tomahawks and war bonnets to ashtrays with the admonition to “Put Your Butts Here.” After almost three hours perusing these gimcrack goods, I ended the visit by announcing that I had to return to my home and family.

On a night out at the nearby Way Inn, long since out of business, we ate like kings for a nominal price. The Russians delighted in such delicacies as Southern fried chicken, corn bread, and baked okra.

My wife and I then belonged to a book club. At our meeting that month, one member said to me, “I saw your Russians walking uptown today.” Well, anyone could spot them. They wore somber clothing, stuck together, and explored our streets with hunched shoulders and downcast eyes.

One small incident made me especially proud to be an American. The four Russian men smoked cigarettes, and I wanted to drive them two hours away to Winston-Salem to visit the Reynolds tobacco plant. When I casually mentioned such a trip to our Dayco contact, he said, "Oh, I forgot to tell you. They're not supposed to go more than thirty miles from town." He smiled. "When we're over there, the limit is three miles. They enforce it."

On one occasion, the translator told me that she thought Russians were more spiritual than Americans, that Russians had suffered more. Anyone who knows the history of the Second World War and the brutalities of the Stalinist regime might well agree, but the comment nonetheless rankled. Later, after the Soviet Union had fallen, the same woman returned to our B&B as a translator for a dance group during Haywood County's annual Folk Moot celebration. This time she wore a small gold cross around her throat. Then I understood. She had concealed her faith, and her suffering, from fear of persecution.

From my reading, I knew that the Russians might expect an exchange of gifts during our farewells. On the day they departed, they presented my wife and me with a small red ceramic horse, which I still own. We gave each of them calculators. Very Russian, very American.

I relate this story of "my Russians" for this reason.

The Soviet Union is gone, thrown into the dustbin of history, but a lesson remains from those Russian visitors.

On the property next to our bed and breakfast, Mountain Projects owned three rental units in an old house. Inside those rent-subsidized apartments were modern appliances and televisions with cable hookups. In the driveway sat the renters' cars.

So make the comparison. Nearly seventy years into the communist worker's paradise, our Russian guests, all of whom

were employed in worthy tasks, were living at the level of Americans on welfare.

As I've said before, both here and elsewhere, say no to socialism (which is not the same as welfare capitalism.)

Say no to communism.

And say yes to liberty.

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