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A Visit to the Enemy

This is not an academic paper, it is a personal account of an official meeting which took place in the Soviet Union in 1983. The narrative highlights how people's fundamental desire to contact and know one another can override the fear and hate so often perpetuated by governments. The paper will be given in three parts. First I will discuss the background narrative to why two women from Wales, an American woman, and a Moscow peace activist were having an official meeting with Oleg Kharkhadin, the influential vice-President of the Soviet Peace Committee. Secondly there are the details of the actual meeting. And finally, the paper will note the immediate consequences for the women involved

Part One.

The activities of the British peace movement during the early 1980s were suddenly thrust into the limelight, by the establishment of a woman's peace camp outside the then little known American base at Greenham Common, Berkshire. The camp was set up as an act of frustration against the lack of publicity given to the ten day march from Cardiff to U.S.A.F. Greenham Common, and the refusal by government authorities to engage in a public debate regarding the proposed deployment of

American missiles on British soil. The march was organised by four women (including myself) from West Wales, and was undertaken by forty women and three men who came from different parts of England and Wales. The history of the Greenham Common peace camp and the activities of the diverse women who went there have been told many times in books, articles, film and exhibitions. But those histories are not the primary narrative this afternoon.

To assist with the organisation of the practicalities of the march, we needed a collective identity, so we called ourselves 'women for life on earth'. This term would be used as the headline for an umbrella of loosely connected future marches, non violent direct actions and other similar activities against the American bases connected with the deployment of nuclear weapons across Britain. One of the little remembered activities of 'Woman for Life on Earth' was the contact they made with 'the enemy'. The 'enemy' being Russia, also known by its collective state as the Soviet Union. This society had been demonised, mainly by the governments of the US and Britain for decades, with accusations of it being an 'Evil Empire' and of wanting world dominance being uttered by world leaders. Although, it must be said that the belligerence of the Soviet state in their international dealings with the West did not help towards dispelling this image. Ann and I hoped to visit this evil Empire and while it was essential to meet with state officialdom of the Soviet Union, we hoped to establish networks with independent peace groups, such as the Moscow based group, The Group for Trust. We also wanted to organise an event where individual women from across Britain could connect with individual women across the USSR. The idea being by encouraging the person to person contact was the key towards dissolving away the fear and hatred that fuels conflict and situations like the Cold war.

To arrange such an event was easier said than done. The level of suspicion which had grown since the Second World War between the East and the West on an international level is difficult to imagine today. Those feelings of suspicion had permeated all levels of society in the West. What was felt by ordinary people in the USSR was difficult to access, as Soviet society had become closed. There were attempts at East/West relations, but they tended to be on an academic level notably the organisation END. By the early 1980s small numbers of peace activists from groups such as Christian CND, Pensioners for Peace were visiting Soviet Russia, but nearly all of their contacts were with Soviet State officialdom, with their visits being localised to Moscow and Leningrad and closely regulated by state 'intourist' guides.

By the very nature of our unstructured and impulsive way of organising and protesting, Ann and I wanted to connect with Russian citizens in a very different manner. A plan was formulated to arrange for approximately 30 women from across the UK, and send them in small numbers of 2/3 to different parts of the USSR to network and exchange ideas with Soviet women. To put the plan into action we had to make a pre-trip trip to obtain permission from state officialdom notably, the Peace Committee and the Women's Committee, as well as hoping to initiate contacts with independent peace groups and individuals who protested like we did. We prepared for the trip (or so we thought) by absorbing as much information about the Soviet system as we could from experts and Russophiles, attended Russian language classes and of course we fund-raised. We also had the good fortune to meet an American, Jean McCollister, a scholar of Russian studies and a linguist, who we enlisted as our interpreter and who incredibly had contacts with the independent Peace group we had hoped to meet, the Moscow Group for Trust.

Part Two

Moscow 1983- It would take me many hours to recount fully how the country overwhelmed us on so many levels. Remember this is a time before the internet, so it was virtually impossible to a sense of a country until you went. So, I will sum up an intense eight days in Moscow and Leningrad in a few phrases before I narrate the story of the meeting which would cause such consternation in Moscow, as well as in certain quarters in Britain. 'empty hotels, long queues for very little unappetising food, futuristic and spotlessly clean metro, children with chains of dandelions woven in their hair, soldiers holding hands, poverty, gangs of women builders, endless birch forests, empty beaches near the Finnish border, columns of tanks in the forest, overwhelming, but secret hospitality and a decaying elegance.

Due to the publicity of Greenham Common, Greenham women were seen as 'heroines' and while we had struggled to get publicity in Britain, we were reliably informed that activities and protests at Greenham were regularly televised across Russia. Regardless of this notoriety we had arrived in Moscow unacknowledged, and without any problems we made contact with members of the Moscow Group for Trust. After numerous meetings and many hours of discussions and debates in member's homes, they overcome their mistrust of us. The group found it difficult to believe that such a well publicised continuous campaign could be organised by ordinary women and believed that it was a set up, a KGB production. It was ironic then, that their own group was seen by some within CND circles as being funded by the CIA. This was far from the truth. The group were of different ages, many were professionals, teachers, surgeons, and academics who wished to see an end to the arms race. Members of the Trust group and their families had suffered KGB harassment of various sorts from beatings and serious injury, to cars being tampered

with, and for a few individuals there was imprisonment. Individuals were stripped of professional and academic awards, and suffered the loss of their jobs. Their crime: demanding a dialogue on a unilateral stance from Russia.

At a picnic for peace in a Moscow public park, the group asked if we would take with us a female member of the group to a meeting we were to have with the Official Peace Committee which had been planned for the following day. We were to be given the 'honour' of meeting with a high ranking official of the state organised Peace Committee, a meeting which was to be televised. It was agreed that Natasha Medvedkova, a lecturer in human geography at Moscow University would accompany us to the meeting.

The following day with a great deal of intrepitation, the four of us set off in a taxi to the meeting. As often happened in our endeavours misfortune led to success. Our taxi broke down in heavy Moscow traffic, and after hailing a second taxi we arrived a full twenty minutes late at the Peace Committee building on Prospekt Mira. Due to our lateness, security was by-passed and we were quickly ushered through the building, therefore nobody stopped us to query who Olga was.

Only when we entered a large room with men and women standing by a very long polished table, did one puzzled individual query in English that they were expecting three, but we were four? We are women for Life on Earth, our numbers grow and this is our latest member from Moscow was our response. Looking puzzled at this comment we were shown to our places along one side of the long table facing committee members/interpreters and secretaries. At the end of the table was a large man, his stern countenance oozed confidence and power. He was Oleg Kharkhardin, vice-Chairman of the Peace Committee and later we were to learn a colonel in the

KGB, and as a special honour we were in his personal office. All at once tea was bought, photographs were taken and informal introductions were made, two other men joined us from the US-Canada Institute, (a Western think tank). With the television camera rolling Kharkhardin made the opening speech: It was a lengthy affair punctuated by remarks of how they were honoured by our visit, how the activities at Greenham were taken seriously and were well published in his country and how we were seen as heroines against the imperialist US (at this point I had worrying images of headlines shouting 'Greenham women duped by Soviets' etc) The atmosphere in this room seemed tense with nobody drinking their tea or making eye contact, only to glance at Olga. Suspicions had been raised. In sequence Ann, myself, and Jean introduced ourselves, and then it was Olga's turn.

Olga started her introduction in Russian, which was translated for us by Jean as the official interpreter had stopped interpreting and just looked at her in horror. The camera man and photographer were ushered out quickly. When Olga got to the part about the Group for Trust, pandemonium ensued: people shouting, stamping their feet and slapping and drumming the table. She vainly tried to continue with her introduction. Kharkhardin interrupted and there was immediate silence. The row that ensued between Kharkhardin and Ann and myself, illustrated the complete lack of understanding that the Peace Committee had about the intentions of the Trust Group or who their Greenham heroines actually were. Their own paranoia regarded any actions outside of state control as threatening and illegal, and they saw no problem in the treatment that was handed out to the Group. Olga tried to speak again and then gave up as the circus of noise resumed. Kharkhardin then asserted his authority, glowered at us and rebuked us at length for our rudeness at bringing Olga to the meeting and to our attitude. He did not understand why we bothered to deal

with this tiny criminal element in Moscow when their peace movement had members from across the country (two hundred and fifty million members, the entire population of the USSR at the last census). He demanded of us 'Is this how you behave in your own country?' We replied that it was, and which was exactly how the peace camp was established. We also stated that as Greenham women we believed in a dialogue between all sides. Olga left at this point saying she did not want to hinder our talks with the peace committee.

Ann and I continued to respond at length to Kharkhardin's argument of the validity of groups like the Moscow Group for Trust. At one point I explained to the shocked committee how many of the British public hated them, saw the restrictions and heavy handedness of the internal police and KGB as reasons to distrust the country. The Russians lack of engaging with unilateralism had convinced many in the West of the necessity to continue to have a nuclear arsenal. The fact that we answered him back seemed to shock the other people in the room. Kharkhardin then rose and left the meeting.

Part Three

On a positive note, after Kharkhardin left there ensued a positive and open discussion for two hours without translation as the Russians who remained were English speakers. The idea of a non state controlled visit to different parts of the country and to allow open personal contacts to take place was seriously discussed. After the meeting we went back to Valery Gdyak's apartment. Valery a physicist had arranged for the group and their followers to meet there. Olga gave an account of the meeting in whispers (due to the apartment being bugged). For the Group for Trust the fact that a member of their group was able to have dialogue, albeit a very limited

dialogue with officialdom was a positive step, although they knew there would be a backlash. The fear of this caused consternation and arguments within the group. Listening to interpretations of their disputes, it suddenly dawned on me the seriousness of demonstrating in the way we did in Britain in a country where we were strangers both culturally and politically. Our naivety would soon be exposed.

The official response was immediate and would prove challenging for us. The popular Western caricature of dark-suited KGB men very suddenly became part of our reality and our paranoia increased by the hour. The film noir we suddenly had parts in included scenes of: Two large men who suddenly appeared to guard our hotel room, resulting in us having to push through them to gain access into our room, our constant tail by foot and by car, the individual who followed us from a lift then pushing himself into a phone booth that Ann was in. This intrusive behaviour continued for the rest of our visit and culminated in our being detained by KGB personnel when we arrived at the airport check in. However, we still managed to make contact with ordinary Russians which led to an impromptu signing of the WFLOE banner at the Kremlin Square.

We knew the meeting was news, and the connections we had made with The Times correspondent Richard Owen came into play. Richard was able to arrange an interview with the Telegraph correspondent, and most importantly, a meeting with a number of foreign correspondents and Olga and her husband Yuri. Our past dealings with the press had made us wary of them, but Richard knew exactly how to frame the story so as to allow the Peace committee some dignity from the affair, but which would also highlight the plight of the Group for Trust.

Olga was arrested in late November 1983 on a trumped-up charge of assaulting a policeman at the trial of Oleg Radzinski, a Trust group member who had been in prison for many months. Shortly before her arrest Olga had attempted to deliver a letter to Mrs. Thatcher via the British Embassy to protest at the arrest and imprisonment of Greenham women. Through END and the growing network of 'UK Trustbuilders' the response to Olga's arrest was swift. It was also publicity in the foreign press that gave a voice to Olga's plight, and which in turn led to demonstrations and the hundreds of messages of support for her, which were sent to the Soviet Embassy in London and to Moscow. This swift response was actually described a few months later by none other than Oleg Kharkhardin when he hosted a visiting Quaker delegation. Kharkhardin stated: 'Within hours of the arrest of Olga Medvedkova my telephone was ringing and telegrams were arriving on the desk of the first Secretary of the Supreme Soviet, comrade Andropov.' Olga's final trial found her guilty, but her sentence of two years hard labour at a prison camp was suspended. To suspend a prison camp sentence was virtually unheard of. The network of dialogue and support had worked.

While an informal network was growing between East and West, our action at the meeting with the Peace Committee was not well received at all in certain sections of the British peace movement. The pro-Soviet stance at all costs was a stance occupied by many on the CND committee. An attitude also adopted by Helen John and other women at the Peace camp, who wrote to the Soviet Women's Committee stating that they did not support our actions, and declaring that we did not represent Greenham women. This was a ridiculous statement as WFLOE was anarchic in its structure and individuals were answerable to themselves. But it was also a shock to me. I had naively believed that those in the peace movement would condemn all

countries that were pursuing the arms race. Apparently not so, the inflexibility of political dogma continued to intrude on the desire for peace. We also had to contend with reports that we were funded by the CIA to discredit the Peace Committee, and many who had visited the Soviet Union on official delegations accused us of discrediting Soviet hospitality by personal letters and publically in the press.

To conclude, I do not regret our actions. It does not harm those in officialdom to be informed of home truths from those they try to suppress. That was achieved by Olga. To pursue dialogue is often a dangerous but necessary action, and to never question the actions, however congenial they may be, of those in power is naive. The ignorance and inaction of visiting activists can unintentionally negate the validity of local activists in the country being visited. I learned the importance of critical analysis when campaigning, especially when dealing with officialdom, and recognised how individuals can negatively affect outcomes when they become blinkered by the emotion of a cause. The following year we did manage, although with some setbacks, to successfully fulfil our hopes of sending small groups of women to different parts of the Soviet Union to network and engage. That however is another story.

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