

2019 Russian Study Tour with Global Network Against Weapons and Nuclear Arms in Space

By Cathy Deppe

As members of an international delegation to the Russian Federation of 25 individuals in May 2019, Alex Walker and I visited Moscow, St. Petersburg, and three cities in Crimea. We came to learn, to listen, and to build a bridge of friendship through citizen diplomacy. We had daily important meetings with Russian journalists, activists, academics, and ordinary citizens. We gained first hand information and historical perspective. The Russian people met us with warmth, openness, and generosity.

We came because we are alarmed by the U.S. demonization of Russia and by the NATO provocations which have created a world of increasing military confrontation, with the U.S. even threatening the first-use of nuclear weapons. Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991 US/NATO has encircled Russia with bases, so-called ‘missile defense’ systems, and escalated “war games” right on its borders, with warships increasing military operations in the Black Sea.

Russia is a country of just 144 million people, with average income of \$400 a month, or \$13 a day. Their annual military budget is \$60 billion and decreasing. The U.S. military budget is \$800 billion and increasing. The U.S. has more than 800 bases encircling the world.

The Russian people love their country with a warmth and depth of love that is difficult for Americans to comprehend. It is a love born of centuries of history, culture and religious faith, and a love born of the suffering and sacrifice of the repeated defense of their Motherland. On Victory Day May 9th, we walked in solidarity with thousands of survivors and family members of the defense of 1941 – 1945 when Americans and Russians were friends and allies against the German fascist invasion and occupation.

Our message is a call to end the demonization of Russia, remove US/NATO warships from the Black Sea, end the escalating war maneuvers on Russia’s borders, and build bridges of diplomacy and friendship.

The following is my personal report.

MOSCOW

April 25th, Arrival at 2 PM, SVO Moscow. Taxi to Aerostar Hotel, only 3 metro stops northwest of the Kremlin near the Stadium. Unpacked and went down to hang out with Bruce Gagnon, our Global Network director, and to meet our Crimean guide before turning in for the night on the 9th floor. Outside our window an amazing sight – across the wide lawns and lanes of traffic in front of the hotel, we saw our first palace.

April 26th, Up early to explore the palace grounds on foot before breakfast. It is now the Petrovsky Hotel, set in a wide park, which was once the palace garden and now the very pleasant walkway to our Metro stop net to the stadium, through the birch trees and past the statue of Lenin. In Moscow, people describe their locations by which metro stop they are near, not so much by their street.

We met all our international group of 25 at 9 AM for introductions and orientation. We saw Dave Webb's PowerPoint, describing the space technology installations that now encircle Russia and much of China as well. (See resources for link). We heard from Prabhu Yadav on the long friendly relationship Russia and Nepal have maintained. After lunch, we took off for Red Square by metro. The gate to the square was, however, temporarily closed that afternoon, in order for preparations to begin for the annual Victory Day / Day of Remembrance celebrations coming on May 9th.

April 27th, Saturday: Our morning presentations were from group members John Schuchardt and Bill Warrick. The highlight was to hear from Alexander Pasechnik, the Chair of Russia Veterans for Peace, Komi, Russia. Afterward, we witnessed the signing of a Statement of Solidarity between the Maine, USA VFP Chapter and the Komi, Russia VFP chapter. Our "citizen diplomacy" efforts at peace building had begun. In his presentation, Borisovich focused on the "No First Strike" policy as rejected by U.S. Congress but implemented by Russia, and agreed on between Russia and China for years. Russia requires three persons to agree to push the nuclear button, but only one person, the U.S. President, is needed in the USA. He said the US President just signed a US military budget approaching one trillion dollars, while the Russian military budget is only 47 billion, and that Russia's percent of the total global GNP is only 2%, with an economy still suffering from past wars, with pensions and wages very low. For example, a Russian doctor earns only between \$574.00 and \$771.00 per month. Given their history, and the current provocations of NATO on their borders, it seems clear that Russia will not hesitate to respond with the nuclear option in defense of the Motherland. I now realize how, given its long traumatic history of suffering wars, invasions and occupations, the Russian people have an unbroken fierce determination to defend their homeland to the last breath.

In the afternoon, Alex and I headed back to Red Square on the Metro and this time got in to take lots of pictures and just hang out with the crowds. In the evening, our guide Tanya offered to take us to church with her, for the Russian Orthodox Easter Mass at midnight. We were impressed by the large numbers of folks who turned out to carry lighted candles in a walk around the cathedral nearby, before entering for the Mass. There has been a major revival of Russian Orthodoxy since the collapse of the soviet Union. Still, we took the opportunity to walk back to the hotel instead, tired out and still jet lagged from our journey.

April 28th, Sunday. This morning we heard from two Russian women professors, Dr. Elena Veduta from Moscow University speaking on the importance of developing cybernetics, an alternative to the market economy, Based on computerized planning, it has the right "system approach" needed. After Stalin, the breakup of the Soviet Union allowed runaway capitalism's market system to destroy the country, creating high unemployment, low wages, and lost pensions. We also had an excellent introduction to the next leg of our trip, the Crimea, from our guide from Leonid, an engaging and well-versed political exile from Kiev who came with Tatyana Bukharina. As it was Sunday, we stayed in for the rest of the day.

April 29th, Monday. This morning we heard important presentations from Tatyana Bukharina on Crimea, by Natalia Semina on the common history between Russia and Crimea, and by musician and filmmaker Constantin Semin on his view of the internal struggle between Russian and Ukrainian oligarchs. Crimea

was part of Russia from 1783 until 1954 when Russia gifted it to Ukraine, although with an autonomy that allowed Russia to keep its Navy at the important Black Sea port. Crimea was 60% Russians, with 75% speaking Russian. Then the Feb 22, 2014 Coup in KIEV (Ukraine) happened – it was originally a grassroots, socialist- populist revolt against corruption. People sang the International. until taken over by neo-Nazi gangs under control of local police controlled by oligarchs. These gangs attacked the people and participated in a military coup against the pro-Russian Ukrainian government. Sevastopol announced non-recognition of the coup. The Soviets lost 83,000 to the Nazi invasion of WWII and 27 million nationwide in WWII, and could not stand for fascism to come into Crimea. We later went to Sevastopol and visited the museum at the battery fort, where thousands abandoned to their fate by retreating generals died at hands of Nazi invaders. We would hear a panel of 4 of the 36 commissioners from Sevastopol who had conducted a referendum overwhelmingly in favor of Russia staying in Crimea and protecting it from the fascist, right-wing coup. It will be very bad if Ukraine uses missiles or gets involved in NATO. This would develop into competing aggressive capitalist countries making war, and “there is no international socialism working class to stop such a war. Instead there is apathy among young people who do not seem alarmed about potential for war. There is “no peace movement anywhere like in the 80’s.” The corporations are running Putin. Constantin said his band protests at Ramstein (Germany’s largest military base) along with Rage Against the Machine and Pussy Riot. There is an “explosion of class anger there, but it is not conscious.”

This ended our 4-day visit to Moscow. We missed the museums due to Monday closures. And our second trip to Red Square was too late in the afternoon to be allowed inside the Kremlin. 4 pm is too late.

CRIMEA

April 30th, Tuesday we departed by air for Simferopol, Crimea’s major city and airport, for several days of touring that began with a stop at the Samantha Smith Peace Camp at ARTEC, on our way to Yalta, and ended with a day trip to Sevastopol. But first, we stopped in Simferopol for the May Day celebrations and our second round of citizen diplomacy with the local “Friendship” peace group.

May 1st, Wednesday - the Ukraina Hotel was unbelievable, full of lush green brocade and silk window dressings. Outside beautiful huge horse chestnut trees bloomed along dangerously broken sidewalks. We were just across from the Cathedral Alexander Nevsky, behind which was a monument to the fallen soldiers of WWII anchored by an old Russian tank. Down the street was a roundabout traffic circle. Pedestrians crossed by stairs leading under the road, where we found beautiful flowers being sold. Coming out into a strange sculpture park of dragons and gargoyles, we tread on cracked walkways between broken park benches. In the intersection was a directional sign pointing to the city attractions, including the Memorial to the Victims of the Fascist Occupation. This is where the May Day parade would end. Simferopol was a small, provincial city, a treat to visit for its older architecture and quieter life, its infrastructure still crumbling from the war and many previous invasions over hundreds of years. The Crimea was invaded 5 times, every 19 years or so, in the 19th century. Still – a springtime treat to be in the “south of Russia” on the Black Sea.

May Day in the Crimea – could not believe I was there on May Day. No military parade here, but a day to celebrate the ethnic diversity of this southern peninsula. A local peace group called “House of Peoples’ Friendship” had invited us to march with them and organized a joint press conference in their building nearby. Our group leader, Bruce Gagnon of Global Network, brought some peace flags for us to carry. I picked the rainbow flag with the word PAX in the middle. As we lined up in the street behind our group banner “NO to NATO – Keep Space for Peace”, curious folks were already photographing my flag. Soon I was asked by the “Friendship” group leader through Bruce to take it down. The problem here was prejudice against gays, not peace.

Later on Marx Street, the Friendship Conference convened a roundtable Discussion of “Public Diplomacy as the Instrument of Developing Friendship and Understanding among Peoples”. There were greetings from officials from the Republic of Crimea to the President of the Russian Federation, the Chairman of a Crimean Parliament Committee, and the director of the Black Sea Association of International Cooperation, as well as presentations from four Global Network members hailing from the U.S., Great Britain, Sweden, and Nepal. Media presence was excellent. Global Network signed an Agreement of Cooperation with the Black Sea Association of International Cooperation that made the local and national news.

May 2nd - We took a tour bus out for the day, visiting the huge children’s Camp ARTEC on the Black Sea, where the little girl from Maine, Samantha Smith, was invited after she wrote a letter to Andropov, Chairman of the Soviet Union prior to Gorbachev. This letter became a model for peacemaking and citizen diplomacy. Later when a Samantha Smith Peace Camp was organized in Maine, my own daughter Amanda would go there. ARTEC 10 camps there, each with its own name, dining hall, student “union” building, and residence hall. We only explored the Samantha Smith Peace Camp, her room overlooking the Black Sea, and toured the camp’s museum exhibit containing her bust. There we made an exchange of gifts brought by John and Carrie Schuchardt, founders of the Massachusetts House of Peace.

We had lunch at a Crimean Tatar restaurant. Tatars are Muslims who form 10% of the population today. Russia has re-established the Tatars, who were exiled to Siberia after having been seen to collaborate with the fascist invaders during WWII. On our bus tour, we passed the ongoing Russian Federation construction of a Tatar mosque, the largest ever built in the country.. After a quick stop at the beautiful Botanical Gardens high on the cliffs above the Black Sea, we drove down to the waterfront city of Yalta, famous for the Big Three Conference held there after WWII. It was there that three men met to carve up the new post-war world: Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin.

Arriving after dark in the crowded, almost claustrophobic port city, we found our hotel Bristol just down the street from the famous promenade on the Black Sea. The loud speakers down that busy walkway blasted dance music until 11 PM for the huge tourist crowds gathered along the water. At 11 PM, someone just switched them off.

May 3: At 8 AM, the speakers were on again. Our whole group first visited Livadia, the palace of Nicholas II, the last Russian Tsar. This was the designated meeting place for the Yalta Conference after

WWII. Then four different groups set out to learn about (1) the effect of sanctions at a former palace converted to a rest home for homeopathic cures, (2) a school for special needs kids, (3) a Veterans Association meeting, and (4) a tour guided by Yalta school children. Alex and I chose to learn about the effect of sanctions, which is really only hurting the foreign tourist trade. Since Yalta is a Florida-like destination for Russian vacationers, it still has plenty of business. And no signs of any Russian occupation or invasion whatsoever. Afterward, I joined a couple of folks who took a taxi to see Chekhov's home and gardens. It was here that he wrote "The Cherry Orchard."

May 4: We all set out for a day trip to Sebastopol, home of the Russian Navy's Black Sea base and witness to a devastating attack by German troops that destroyed most of the city and left more than 83,000 soldiers and civilians who could not be evacuated in time to their fateful destruction by the Nazis. We first visited the battery out at the edge of the sea, walking underground among the battlements, and heard the story of that event. The nearby museum commemorating the fallen contained an atrium set up as a planetarium; the visitors walk in the darkened hallway lined with photos of people who lost their lives defending Sebastopol, then into a darkened atrium with a star-filled ceiling shaped like a cup. As sad music plays and silence is requested, blazing stars "fall" towards upturned faces, turning into pictures of people, old and young, who were killed. As the pictures fill the sky, some begin to fade while new ones fall, creating a very moving spectacle. You can feel how the suffering caused by war is still close to the lives of those who remained and to their descendents. Our guide told us her personal story of loss to explain her own emotional presentation. It has been 75 years since then, and the feelings are still raw.

Sebastopol is also home of the political movement called the Crimean Spring, which circulated a referendum on Crimea remaining with Russian Federation at the time of the 1914 coup. 85% of the voting population participated to pass it overwhelmingly. We heard from four of these referendum leaders after our museum visit, then went downtown to the harbor and joined the local folks walking the promenades. Out in the harbor stands a tall "monument to the sunken ships" – when Russia sank their entire fleet in order to block the harbor from the German ships

Leaving Sebastopol we stopped to visit the ruins of a Greek Temple, and after traversing the Balaklava Valley ("Into the Valley of Death rode the 500" – Alfred Lord Tennyson), we stopped in the Balaklava City harbor. This was a small ancient seaport at the foot of surrounding mountains. Here there is a hidden submarine base – deep in a cave beneath a mountain at sea's edge. That's a story for another time. Or Wikipedia.

ST. PETERSBURG

May 5: It was time to leave the Crimea, and we took an early bus to the Airport in Simferopol for our flight to St. Petersburg. We settled in on the famous Nevsky Prospekt Blvd, about a mile straight east of the Kremlin city center, the famous museums, amid truly amazing architecture first developed by rulers Peter the Great and Catherine the Great around the many rivers and bridges of this northern Russian city. On May 9, we would walk straight out our hotel door and into the parade of one million who were headed down the Nevsky to the Winter Palace Plaza.

May 6 and 8 - Free days! People spilt up and explored the city on their own. We did some shopping and sight-seeing along the boulevards. I went on my own excursion to a nearby famous monastery, where many famous Russian artists, musicians and literary figures are buried. The Winter Palace and the Hermitage remain for our next trip.

May 7 Tour Day in the rain – our tour guide took us to the fascinating Museum of Political History, and to the church of the Spilled Blood where so many former Tsars are buried right inside the sanctuary. The story of the spilled blood was a surprise – it does not refer to Jesus Christ on Calvary, but to Tsar Alexander, who was stabbed to his death just outside the cathedral as he walked along the river bank.

But the museum was quite fascinating. It is housed in the former palace of a Bolshoi ballerina, after it was taken over by the Bolsheviks during the Russian Revolution and used as headquarters. Lenin often spoke from the balcony of the house, which overlooks a city street bordered by a big park. There huge crowds gathered to hear him. I brought home a portfolio of USSR political posters, keeping a promise made to the Los Angeles Center for Political Graphics.

May 9 - Day of Remembrance / Day of Victory, when WWII ended in Russia, 1945. Walkers started early and walked right down Nevsky Blvd past our hotel, the Kentron Boutique. Many carried photos of their relatives who fought. Over a million people participated in this annual holiday. After 75 years, people are still grieving. It was our last day in town on this wonderful study tour. We would leave for Los Angeles early the next morning.

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Resources: Many links to blogs, pictures, and news coverage of this study tour are available at www.space4peace.org, the Global Network website. I highly recommend reading the works of Belarusian Nobel Prize winner Svetlana Alexievich, journalist and oral historian, for her remarkably evocative recorded interviews of witness testimonies. **Voices from Chernobyl** and **Secondhand Time** are simply unforgettable