A Summer Behind the (now rusted) Iron Curtain: 
The Account of the Experiences that Led Me to Get a Mullet

By

Brendan MacNabb

Being in Moscow, the first thing that I noticed was that all of the signs were in Russian, and while this was completely expected, it was still a shock seeing all of the writing in a different alphabet, but still being able to read them. That was only the beginning of my culture shock. Within hours of landing, I was walking past the statue of General Zhukov, who is forever captured in bronze riding triumphantly over a Nazi banner, and onto Red Square, with the ornate façade of the ГУМ on my left. There, on the right, rose the beautifully imposing, and ever symbolic red brick walls of the Kremlin. Before me stood the resplendent St. Basil’s Cathedral, the heart of both Moscow and Russia, capped with its nine unique domes.

What struck me the most was how beautifully imperfect the square is. The cobblestones sloped in every direction, and there was no symmetry to the architecture, especially with the modernist pyramid that is Lenin’s mausoleum placed just in front of the Kremlin’s ancient walls. It was not planned with the meticulous detail of Palace Square in St. Petersburg, but it also lacked the feeling of lifelessness that pervades Peter’s city. The beauty of Red Square lay in its imperfections, because each had its own story that was intertwined with the very history and soul of Russia itself.

Two weeks later I returned to Red Square for День России, which is the holiday celebrating the Russian state and people (like Independence Day in the US, but without the history and symbolism, as it has only been a holiday since 1992). This was the most surreal experience of my entire life. Tens of thousands of people packed onto Red Square for the patriotic celebration. The moment that jumps out in my mind, and will for the rest of my life, is seeing fireworks explode over St. Basil’s (in daylight because it was 11:30 pm, and the sun does not set until about
midnight around the summer solstice) while everyone in the crowd sings the Russian national anthem (which has the same musical composition as the Soviet anthem, but with new words). This was a sight that I never expected to see in my life, and I was completely in awe of the improbability of any American witnessing this only twenty-five years ago.

Moscow, in many ways shows this tenuous relationship that Russia has with its past and present. Some people long for the days of the Soviet Union, when Russia was a world superpower, and there were jobs to be had, while others equate the Soviet past with a repressive, totalitarian government. No site represents this struggle with the past better than the ВВЦ, which is a monument park built during the Cold War to commemorate all of the values of the Soviet Union. As one exits the Metro station, the first visible landmark is a massive statue of a rocket ship, with plaques bearing the names of every cosmonaut to enter outer space. Apart from that, what dominates the skyline is the massive stainless steel sculpture of the Worker and Kolkhoz Woman, twenty-five meters tall, and standing on a massive pedestal, thirty-five meters high.

But the next aspect of the skyline is a massive Ferris wheel, and when one enters the park, it is noticeably overrun with the type of cheap carnival rides that would be found at a state fair, and people in the costumes of characters, much like at Disneyland. This is the only place in the world where you can have your picture taken with both Mickey Mouse and Josef Stalin (and if you are lucky maybe even Lenin, or one of the tsars). And in the center of all this blatant American-style capitalism, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin stands, twenty feet tall, staring blankly into his philosophical abyss, pointing toward his dream of a Russian future that was never quite achieved. His stoic resolve now looks more like a contemptuous scowl eternally sculpted into his bronze face.

Further in are the ruins of pavilions that were once dedicated to the unique aspects of each Soviet republic. These once splendid monuments now crumble with the decay of time and apathy. Opposite the statue of Lenin’s ultimate depression is a magnificent and ornate brass fountain, another remnant of Soviet pride. Now, people of all ages swim in this fountain on particularly hot summer days.
Finally, at the very back of the park is Russia’s national space museum. In the square in front of the building are a Soviet rocket and a WWII cargo plane that became a mural glorifying the victory over Nazi Germany in the Great Patriotic War. On a typical day, Russian families stream into the museum to see space artifacts of their heroes, such as Yuri Gagarin. However, for one weekend in June, Moscow’s youth converge on this site for Moscow’s Park Music Festival, which this year featured the popular Russian punk-rock band Мумий Тролль and the American group The Killers. That the crowd sang along (or tried to sing along, as they did not know the words or what they meant) to the Killers showed how much Russia has evolved from Soviet times. The mural plane as part of the backdrop served as further emphasis as the socio-political foil.

Being a part of the crowd, both here and on Red Square, and walking down the beautiful embankment of the Moskva River, and through Park Gorkovo, I realized that Russia was as unique and wonderful as any other. I met people who were experiencing this human life, the same as everyone else, but in their own way. This realization, in and of itself would have made the summer completely worthwhile, because it made the world seem a smaller and more hospitable place. Then the all of the experiences that I had there are now an integral part of my story, of who I am, and I can say that this summer in Russia is irreplaceable to me.

People always ask me, “But why would you want to go to Moscow?”

My response is always the same: “Why not?”