

Moscow in Autumn
*The Russian capital in October
1962, a few months after Albert
Schmidt finished his stay.*



Cold War Chronicle

Notes from a sojourn into the heart of the Soviet Union

By Albert J. Schmidt

In 1961, the Cold War was running hot. The same week in April that a CIA-backed invasion of Cuba by anti-Castro exiles flopped spectacularly, cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin orbited the Earth, another first to go with the USSR's 1957 Sputnik satellite coup. Riding high at a summit in Vienna that June Premier Nikita Khrushchev pummeled President John Kennedy. Back home the Soviet premier was demoting predecessor Joseph Stalin and plunging the Soviet state more deeply into global politics. In August the Berlin Wall went up, putting the U.S. and the USSR eyeball to eyeball.

The nuclear superpowers, as if acknowledging the risk of mutually assured destruction, had begun people-to-people exchanges. That fall one such program was seeking American scholars to spend 1962 living and learning in the USSR.

The opportunity appealed to Albert Schmidt, an assistant professor at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. A World War II veteran who as an undergrad majored in history thinking to teach high school, Schmidt instead pursued and got a PhD and spent the Fifties teaching and studying at colleges and universities. In 1961 he was on a postdoctoral fellowship at Indiana University. He was learning Russian and strengthening his grasp of Eastern European history. Schmidt's mentor at Indiana, Robert Byrnes, a French historian turned Sovietologist, encouraged his young friend to apply to spend 1962 in the USSR. Schmidt, 36, was accepted.

But the program only funded spouses, and Albert and Kathryn Schmidt had three young daughters. As a compromise, Al arranged a semester-long solo foray. He hoped to reside in Leningrad, formerly St. Petersburg, but was told he would have to live at Moscow University, known by its Cyrillic abbreviation, "MGU." Stocking up on art books as gifts for Soviets he expected to encounter, Schmidt prepared to leave. He promised he'd write often, which he did, also keeping a journal January through June 1962. The following narrative, adapted from a memoir that is cited at albert-schmidt.com, synthesizes material from those sources kindly provided by Al and Kathy Schmidt, who since 1990 have been enjoying retirement in Washington, DC.—Michael Dolan



Brothers in Arms
On May Day 1962, as Albert Schmidt was in the USSR, Fidel Castro and Nikita Khrushchev were riding high.

TRAVELING IN JANUARY 1962 by rail to New York and on RMS *Queen Elizabeth* to France, Schmidt paused in Paris, then toured the Loire Valley. He and fellow program participant George Karcz, Polish-born survivor of years as a POW of the Soviet army turned professor of economics, entered Eastern Europe at Prague, Czechoslovakia.

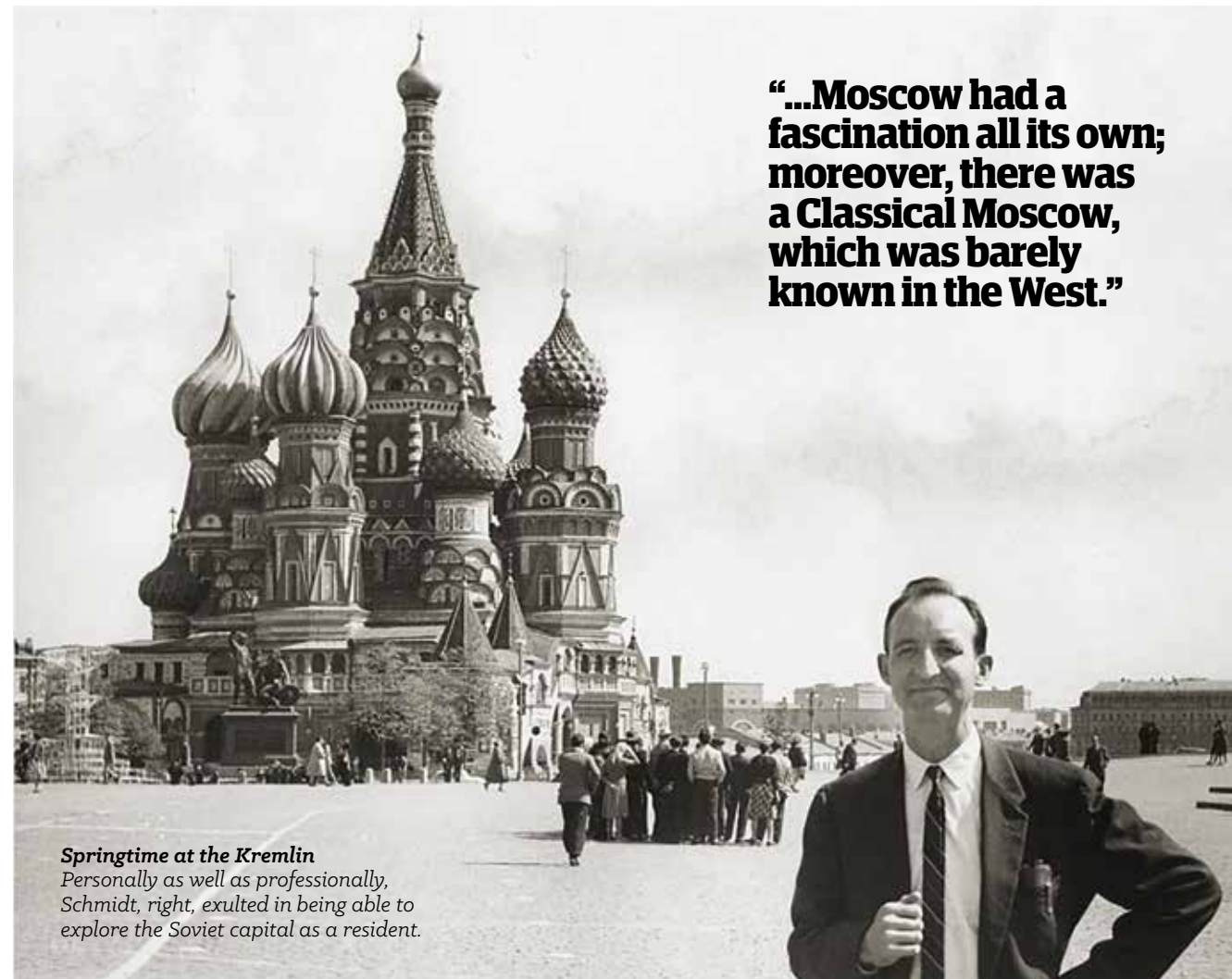
"People have been quite courteous but rarely take the initiative in speaking," Schmidt wrote while in the Czech capital. "I think they sense that George & I are foreigners but seem genuinely surprised that we are Americans. Perhaps even more surprising is the fact that we offer to converse with them in Russian..."

"...The train from Prague to Moscow via Chop (Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic) was dirty and with few amenities, but the ride was an experience to treasure. The train was essentially a local, making many stops, taking on and dropping off people, mostly peasants. Some even carried chickens. The toilets on the train approximated an ancient privy in both looks and stench; nor was there anything resembling a dining car. One simply hopped off at a village or town stop, hurriedly bought bread and sausage and filled one's cup with

tea and jumped back on before the train departed. The ride took a disturbing turn when we passed through Slovakia near the Hungarian border. George and I shared our compartment with two very sleazy-looking fellows who kept eyeing us...I opened my knife taking an extra-long time slicing our sausage. Suddenly, both rose and seemed almost to lunge toward me. I braced myself. They drew back, sheepishly revealing their intent: they were ethnic Hungarians who wished merely to show us Hungary. We conversed henceforth in Russian and shared our sausage..."

"...Generally, the train was cold and it grew colder still as we passed through the Carpathian Mountains during the night and approached the Ukraine. At Chop, as with all Soviet border crossings, it took some hours to negotiate entrance—and adjust our wheels to the gauge of Soviet tracks. I supposed that a major reason for the long delay was my art book parcel. The customs guard opened each page of every book, seemingly enjoying the work immensely. Nothing was confiscated or refused, although he did have some questions..."

"...The ride from Chop via Kiev to Moscow (11:00 p.m. Sat. to 7:30 a.m. Monday) was a lark. It was comfortable (comparatively speaking) as we



Springtime at the Kremlin
Personally as well as professionally, Schmidt, right, exulted in being able to explore the Soviet capital as a resident.

"...Moscow had a fascination all its own; moreover, there was a Classical Moscow, which was barely known in the West."

had sleepers (a board with a mattress). Slovak students returning to Moscow from vacation were eager to talk English & about America so they were in our compartment often. Very interesting to compare them with Coe students—same age, looks, good nature—generally a lot more serious.

"...MY FIRST AND LASTING IMAGES of the USSR were the snow-covered and frozen fields as we rolled through the Ukrainian farmland. We stopped in Kiev and surged on to Moscow, where we were met by our old friend Mal Brown, grinning broadly in his beaver hat. Filling us in on life in Moscow, he shepherded us to Em-gay-oo, or Moscow University, where we would be living for the next four and a half months.

"...Although I had requested being placed in Leningrad, I took quite enthusiastically to Moscow...besides the old Kremlin at the juncture of two rivers, there were successive rings around the citadel...Moscow also was the center of the USSR; Leningrad was in some respects a provincial city. Moscow had a fascination all of its own; moreover,

there was a Classical Moscow, which was barely known in the West.

"...Today we saw the foreign office head & got our pay for February (surprise!)—\$130. This afternoon I shopped at GUM! Bought cap, spoon, lock, etc. Hats very expensive...Tonight I was invited to dinner by an American couple. Now I am in my room. Must wash it down; have already sprayed it. Tomorrow I see my adviser, go to the embassy to shop & get mail. MGU is a fabulous place—everything is done the hard way—great inefficiency, yet the 20,000 students here must be accomplishing something. They come from all parts of the world. I expected a suitemate from North Vietnam. Instead got one from Omsk..."

"...I ride downtown each day from Lenin Hills where the university is located. I can take a bus but it's slow and crowded. The metro is sleek, fast, but requires a 10-minute walk to the station. Weather is the deciding factor. The atmosphere in bus or metro is decidedly impersonal and at times even rude, but New Yorkers are not always courteous either. Moscow is dotted with new apartment houses, though they age quickly, it seems. Muscovites dress plainly but rarely shabbily. Virtually everyone wears a fur hat. I don't know whether all Russians detect that I am not Russ—but few know that I am American. Today when I went to the embassy the police closed ranks on me, but when I spoke they smiled and let me pass..."

"...Thursday night Mal Brown & I celebrated getting \$25 from Intourist on a part of a ticket not used getting here. We went to one of Moscow's exclusive restaurants—the Uzbekistan—and had shashlik (skewered beef),

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COURTESY OF ALBERT J. SCHMIDT



Secular Worship Site

To glimpse the remains of Soviet leader Nikolai Ilyich Lenin, right, sightseers queued for hours. After sharing a mausoleum with Lenin for less than 10 years, the corpse of successor Joseph Stalin was suddenly removed before Schmidt could get to the tomb.



salad, and dry Georgian wine and a delicious bread. It was the best meal that I have had since arriving. We sat with two distinguished-looking men with whom we eventually conversed. The one next to me leaned over and referred to his companion as 'my general.' The other was a colonel in the Red Army. When they found that we were Americans, the discussion turned political—the horrors of atomic war & the values of our sitting together eating & drinking. They even shared their champagne...."

"...TODAY WAS PERHAPS THE BEST sightseeing that I have had. Ed K. & I went to Kolomenskoe—the setting for an important 16th-century palace and a 17th-century palace. I felt upon arriving in the village that this could be the 19th century & not Soviet Russia. The quaintly decorated wooden houses might well have existed in the same form during the days of Gogol. After passing through the village, we came to the palaces & churches—snow covered, as was the whole village, set on a bluff overlooking a bend of the Moscow River...

"...Thursday morning I went into town & walked to the Kremlin. I went to a number of the churches & marveled at their beauty. They are now museums. The icons are magnificent. I have a pretty fair feel for the city now and have no trouble on my own. I feel like a real Muscovite...

"...You have never seen so much fussing as on the buses here. Two women were giving a young fellow hell for not giving up his seat. They implied he was a pensioner. Finally he blew up & said he had been working all day & was tired. Yesterday a woman was accused by the checker [kontrol] of not paying. When a man bought her a ticket, the checker turned on him...

"...A Moscow evening newspaper stated that the embalmed body of Stalin would be removed from the mausoleum in Red Square, where it had lain next to Lenin since 1953. A couple weeks earlier I had waited in line to see the two bodies. The next morning, I rushed to Red Square and joined a large crowd. The granite monolith over the door still had the names of both Lenin and Stalin, but a small sign informed the public that the

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Soviet Shoppers

Whenever he visited retail stores during his stay, Schmidt found himself absorbed into bustling crowds of eager consumers, as at GUM, left.

mausoleum was *zakryt no remont* (closed for repairs). This evoked a laugh. Not infrequently when one goes to a shop, a barber or shoe-repair shop, say, one is likely to find the store closed with an identical sign. By the next morning another monolith had been put in place containing only Lenin's name...

"...I went to the Lenin Museum & found the materials pertaining to Lenin & the rise of Bolshevism immensely interesting...At the Moscow Art Theater Museum I looked over a mass of stuff on Stanislavsky & the MAKhAT from its beginning in 1897—very, very interesting. I found several books that I needed. I have become very absorbed in an 18th century sculptor, Fedot Shubin. My Russian reading is coming along well & even the speech is improving...

"...Stopped at Hotel Moskva and ordered two tickets for Borodin's opera 'Prince Igor' at the Kremlin Palace Theater Monday night. Whether I get them remains to be seen. I do have a ticket tonight for the Red Army Ensemble—Russian Dancing & singing. Everyone says it's first-rate. Tickets are so cheap—\$1.30. The opera is a bit more. David Oistrakh is \$1.20!"

"FROM THE MOSKVA I went to the Institute for the Theory & History of Architecture. The director was out but someone there wished to see me. This someone was a very vivacious woman in her forties who has just completed a work on contemporary American architecture. She spoke excellent English, and we talked for 2½ hrs. Alexandra C. is the wife of a prominent soviet architect and mother of a 15-year-old son. She was thrilled that I had seen some of the places she knew and could discuss points of her theme. She emphasized that she "is in love with American architecture" but not reluctant to criticize it. Feels there is a growing trend toward eclecticism, especially in the interior—Philip Johnson in particular. Know him! She's very critical of urban development & making cities for cars instead of pedestrians. She

Nationalized Treasure

After centuries of private ownership, the Arkhangelskoe estate was taken over by the state and converted into a museum.

feels urban renewal is a lost cause because of private ownership of property & "monopolies" that prevent long range planning & appropriate government action. I staggered her when I told her that if she were going to write an honest account, she ought to delete such political cliches as 'monopolies.' I admitted that Big Business often opposes planning but there is equally strong opposition from individuals who do not like the government playing an increased role. I pointed out that though planning is needed in our urban development we are not inclined to run rough shod over individual rights to achieve it. She had a number of stereotypical notions of Americans—publicity seekers, etc. I assured her that not all of us are from Madison Ave. She was amazed that I did not smoke; she thought all Americans did."

"...THERE IS NEVER A STORE where one does not have to wait in a line. Great hunger for consumer products of all kinds. You should see the mobs in GUM and SUM—the largest department stores. Every night there is a large number of shows, concerts, operas, etc.—always sold out, and a different show each night at every theater & opera house, no runs of one show as in New York or London. Everybody eagerly awaits the return of Boris Godunov which was here just before I arrived...

"...Had a special thrill last night as I rode home on the bus from Dead Souls. Passed along the Moscow River & looked up at the high Kremlin walls & the illuminated church & palaces, very impressive. On the other side of the Kremlin



RICHARD HARRINGTON/THREE LIONS/GETTY IMAGES; PHOTO BY MIKHAIL TERESHCHENKOYAS VIA GETTY IMAGES



Land of Contrasts

From performances in Moscow by the Red Army Chorus, left, to timeless agricultural scenes in rural Georgia, below, Schmidt saw humanizing aspects of the USSR absent from the political rhetoric of the day.

Tolstoy house we went to the Hotel National for dinner & what a good dinner we had. I had a beef fillet (tough but good!), green salad, wine (Georgian, dry—excellent). Ed had chicken—good, too. We went to the Kremlin Theater for the Vienna Philharmonic. The program was something of a disappointment as the only thing played all evening was Strauss. Waltzes are all right, but a whole evening? Yet the audience ate it up & got one encore after another. We observed the conductor looking up into the box just beyond us. We peered, too, and got a real eyeful. The whole Presidium was there: Premier Khrushchev, Mikoyan, Koslov, Suslov, Brezhnev, Kalinin, along with the Austrian ambassador (I suppose) and other Russians I was not able to identify. Khrushchev got a great hand from the audience & returned the applause. The concert was fun. The director played the violin as he conducted. The only thing missing was the beer & beer garden...”

“...LAST EVENING, after leaving Andronikov Monastery, I stood admiringly watching a small

beneath the walls is the Alexander Garden—a lovely area for walking. It is snow-covered now and exceptionally nice for walking & meditating. The city is fascinating & I mean to know it from stem to stern before I finish....

“...Ed & I went to the Usupov Palace at Arkhangelskoe, perhaps 15 miles outside the center of the city. We saw a good deal of old frame architecture which is fast disappearing in favor of colorless apartment houses. The palace & park were lovely. The mansion was yellow with lovely gardens & statues surrounding it, and filled with lovely paintings by French, Italian, & even English painters. It was a superb example of cultural intercourse between Russia & Western Europe during the 18th & early 19th centuries. It was interesting, too, to see an unfamiliar Van Dyck, several Tiepolos, and a Gros.

“On returning to Moscow we found we had time to visit Tolstoy’s Moscow estate, a frame house built in 1808. Everything was much as the great writer had left it—clothes and all. The photographs were interesting. From the



Outer Space and Inner Space

Yuri Gagarin’s orbit, above, put the USSR one up. Gardens at Moscow University harkened to past times.



boy learning to ride his new bike. His grandfather was there, quite proud. We talked for a bit and before long were in deep political discussion. He observed that the American people were good and peace-loving, but that our government was bad. I assured him that we were responsible for our government and that I did not share his opinion. Naturally, neither convinced the other, but it took 45 minutes to achieve this. I still do not find it easy to argue in Russian...

“We are often treated too well. In the dining room at breakfast one day there was an incident. A table had been set aside for us and a peasant sat down at it. When asked to leave by the hostess, he replied angrily that he was a Soviet man and didn’t have to. Quite an argument ensued. We were embarrassed but admired his pluck. After all this is what is preached here.”

“...Yesterday five of us left Moscow at 7:00 a.m. & got back about midnight. We went by bus to Yasnaya Polyana, the Tolstoy estate. It is a lovely place about 120 miles from Moscow, near the city of Tula. We saw a good deal of back country life. The villages & collectives did not appear so prosperous as in the north & east. A typical *Sovhoz* (state farm) or *Kolkhoz* (collective farm) includes a number of villages. They consist of unpainted wooden structures (houses, barns, sheds, out-houses), picket fences, stacks of twigs for firewood, roofs of sod, grass, or tin, chickens, geese, goats, sheep (many black), a private garden plot as well as the collective one, men & women working, wells, and horse carts as well as tractors. People we encountered seemed a bit more backward—many bearded peasants, more horse carts, etc. All this was very photogenic but it is not at all appropriate or sage to take such pictures so, alas, you will not see rural Russia quite as I saw it.

“Now that the snow has left & the mud has

dried, there is dust. Tula was especially dusty. Yasnaya Polyana is 20 minutes out of Tula. It is a lovely place. Tolstoy’s house was a comfortable white one—not so large as some of the palaces I have visited around Moscow—but more delightful in its intimate character. The house is on a large estate, most of which is birch forest. It is enchanting. I was reluctant to visit the grave but was glad I did for it is located in a lovely spot in the glen, surrounded by tall pines & birches, almost a fairyland setting. We brought a picnic lunch & ate it by one of the small ponds. When we got back to Moscow, we were filthy.”

“...RUSSIAN STUDENTS are always interested in learning about the U.S. They are fascinated by a much-publicized documentary that’s circulating—not so much by the clips of the Pentagon but by the number of cars in the Pentagon parking lots. I have been able on a weekly basis to obtain permission to bring bundles of *Time* magazines from the U.S. Embassy to the university dorms—truly a first! Students fight for copies. Another positive indicator was my securing permission to invite Russian students—and, just as surprising, their eager acceptance—to come to the U.S. Embassy to see a film of John Glenn’s space flight. Space rocketry since Yuri Gagarin’s flight of several years earlier was a source of unending pride among Soviet citizens. The students were intensely interested in the Glenn flight...”

“...TODAY WAS A *PRASNİK*, or holiday, to end all holidays—May Day. Only the most essential worked. The big event is, of course, the huge military parade in Red Square & vicinity. Without a ticket there was almost no possibility to get past the numerous cordons of militiamen. We—George Karcz, Stan, & I—did the next best thing. We went to the U.S. Embassy which the parade passes.

“A demonstration passed, with people carrying banners, huge placards of Soviet leaders, flowers, signs such as *Miru, Mir!* (To peace, peace!) & marching bands. Apparently most of the demonstrators were from certain sections of the city & included men, women & children. Since the papers have had much to say about the resumption of atomic testing, I thought there might be a demonstration at the embassy, but the parade was most orderly.

In Russia students were keen to watch an American film to see the masses of vehicles that owners parked at the Pentagon.



ALEXANDR NEVEZHINSKIY VIA AP; MARK REDKIN/FOTOSOZUZ/BETTY IMAGES; BETTMANN/GETTY IMAGES; DEAN CONGER/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES



Demonstrations converged at the Place of the Insurrection, an important point in the 1917 episode & just down the street from our embassy. The buildings & streets were decorated in every conceivable fashion. Radio & TV carried only the martial music & commentary on the parade.

"After the citizen marchers came the military: amphibious cars, troop carriers, anti-tank vehicles, troop carriers pulling cannon, & rocket carriers. Some cannon were probably capable of delivering atomic warheads. After the parade we went to the Hotel Warsaw for a good dinner."

"...I FINALLY MADE IT TO LENINGRAD. Stan Z. & I left last night at 11:00 & arrived here this morning at 8:15. Since the transportation was largely financed by the Exchange Committee, we took a cab through Moscow & rode 1st class on the train. We shared a compartment with a Russian with whom we talked and drank & ate. The hours before retiring were quite pleasant.

From the vantage point of the American Embassy, Schmidt and fellow American scholars watched the May Day parade up close.

Martiality on Display

The traditional May Day parade featured masses of well-drilled troops and military equipment as well as processions by civilian marchers.

"We are staying at one of the old pre-Revolutionary hotels, the Europe, or Evropeiskaia. Our room is deluxe for only \$2 or \$3 each per day. It is more expensive here than in Moscow, especially eating. First day we met Mal Brown & another couple & had breakfast. Then Stan & I started down the Nevsky Prospekt, the main street. There is a charm here which is altogether absent from Moscow. For one thing the architecture is not so depressing.

"We made our way to the Neva River & there saw the famous Admiralty spire, the Winter Palace, home of the Hermitage Museum on Winter Palace Square, where so much history was made in 1917. We walked along the beautiful Neva until we came to the statue of Peter. There we saw a boat. We decided to use it. It was a good move as we were abroad for more than an hour & saw a tremendous amount of Leningrad. Had lunch at the Europe & then went shopping at a bookstore where I found a book for which I had been looking for months.

"The city is fantastically rich in architectural monuments. When one walks down Nevsky Prospekt, one is almost overwhelmed by the magnitude of the Kazanskii Sobor, a church modeled in some respects after St. Peter's in Rome—especially the dome and colonnade. It is now an anti-religious museum.

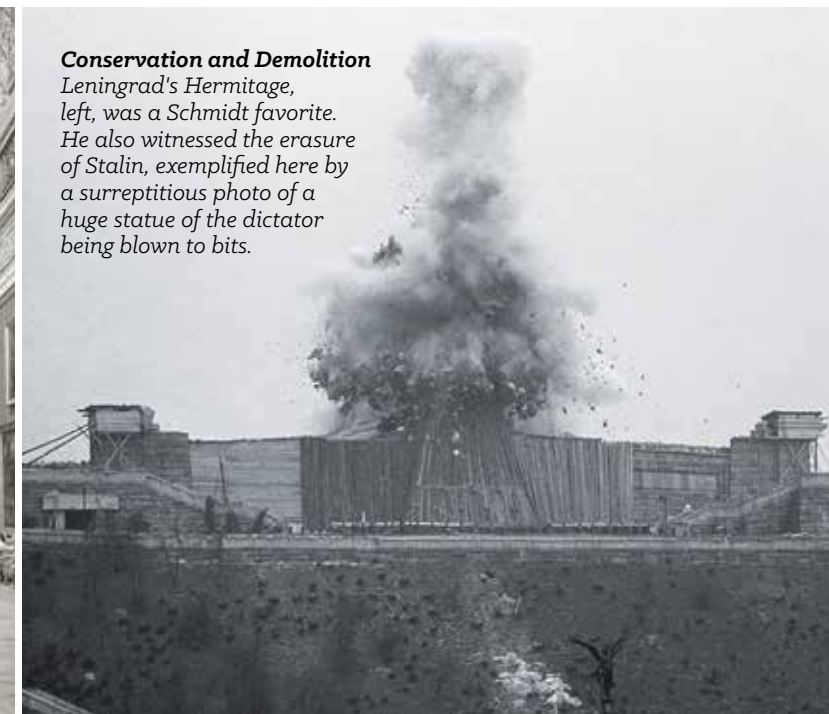
"...Yesterday, because it was raining, we went to the Hermitage gallery, which includes the Winter Palace. We trod through the Winter Palace room by room, one more magnificent than the former. The baroque staircase was one of the most ornate pieces of architecture I've ever seen—white marble & gold paint as well as swirling & curving figures sculptured in every conceivable place on the wall & staircase. The splendor continued in each room. Delicate bas-relief on walls & ceilings, lavish use of gilt, indescribably beautiful parquet floors, marble columns of various colors, displays of porcelain, clothing, portraits, etc...

"...I wandered down to the Neva & watched children playing by the huge Admiralty fountain. It was a warm, lovely night &, as in Paris, everybody takes to the streets & parks. I sat on a bench near an elderly lady. When two little girls came to her, I asked if they were her grandchildren. She said yes. 'Your Russian is different,' she said. 'You are not from Leningrad.' I agreed & she asked from what city did I come. I said that I was from America & she was visibly surprised; she had thought I was Estonian. As I walked back



Conservation and Demolition

Leningrad's Hermitage, left, was a Schmidt favorite. He also witnessed the erasure of Stalin, exemplified here by a surreptitious photo of a huge statue of the dictator being blown to bits.



along the Nevsky a voice behind me said, 'Good evening, my friend.' It was some young kid trying to buy clothes, etc. I answered in Russian that I knew no English. He proceeded to guess from where I came—Czechoslovakia, Germany, Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia. Finally, I told him & we had a good laugh...

"...Sitting in the cafe waiting for Ed K. to come to breakfast, I was surprised to see him greet & shake hands with the gentleman at the table next to me. The fellow was obviously Russian so I wondered how Ed knew him. Well, he didn't; he was introducing himself to Dmitry Shostakovich, the composer. Shostakovich greeted both of us as he left."



Dmitry Shostakovich

(AT SEMESTER'S END, before departing stateside, Schmidt and companions traveled south to the Caucasus to visit some of the Soviet republics.)

"...It is most fascinating to see how non-Russ peoples in the USSR live. I sense a strong national feeling & pride. Yerevan [Armenia], only a few miles from the Turkish border, seems much like an Arab city. In the older section are clay or adobe houses and in the marketplace Kurds appear in bright-colored dress, almost like Gypsies. The market is quite a sight, especially the fresh strawberries of which I partook. They were delicious....

"...Monuments to Stalin had been removed everywhere. In Prague, Moscow, and Leningrad there were only empty bases. This was true everywhere but in Georgia. As our bus entered Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, there was a mighty stone

likeness of Stalin waving us on. As we entered the hotel we were greeted by a huge Stalin in the lobby. Needless to say, we made much over it—perhaps too much. That night we heard hammering. In the morning Stalin was nowhere to be seen. We were told that the monolith had had to be removed for repairs.

More than likely he (it!) had been demolished during the night. Had our ado over the statue hastened de-Stalinization in Stalin's hometown?"

(RETURNING TO MOSCOW VIA JET—his first such trip—Al packed up and made ready to travel west by train through several Eastern Bloc countries before crossing Europe to board a ship for New York. He was to arrive in Cedar Rapids on July 10.)

"...I reached the Russian-Polish border at Brest. Russian officials made me leave the train as I did not have the internal Russ passport which university officials had insisted I give them in Moscow. The border police held the train until they phoned Moscow. When

the call did not go through I was told to get my baggage & prepare to stay a while in Brest. Did I boil—in Russian! Just as I finished packing to get off the train, word came from Moscow that I was OK. The train started seconds later. Talk about a tight squeeze. Did I breathe easier in Poland!

"But then another problem!! It is illegal to export Soviet currency or import Polish currency. In Czechoslovakia an exchange official had converted money on the train but not in Poland. So I arrived in Warsaw with no money. For a pack of cigarettes, I got a taxi ride to the hotel but there they had no record of my reservation. I was patient & finally got a lovely room & some money—so all's well...

"Warsaw is different. Guess what I read in the hotel lobby while waiting for a room—the Sunday edition of *The New York Times*. Never once had I seen it in Moscow! Had a supper like I've not had since Paris—mushroom omelette, tomato salad, delicious rolls & butter, Polish beer and a delightful conversation in Russian with a Polish engineer. Finished eating at 12:30 a.m.

"This morning I'm tired but satisfied. I am going to enjoy this swing in Eastern Europe, but I can hardly wait until July 10..." ★

TAR-TASS NEWS AGENCY/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

CLAUDE JACOBVILLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY IMAGES, AP PHOTO, CHRONICLE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO