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International Trends

The Russians are Coming!

The Russians are Coming!

by Pat Burak

"Russian mentality is not based on common sense...It has nothing to do with common sense. Our thinking is not orderly, logical. In Western culture...emotion is considered to be on a lower level than reason. But in Russia, no. It is bad to be rational, to be smart, clever, intelligent and so on. And to be emotional, warm, loving, maybe spiritual, in the full meaning of that word—that is good."

(The New York Times, 10/28/90)

This analysis by Tatyana Tolstaya, a contemporary Russian author, may be helpful in discussing the implications of admitting students from Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, or any of the other former republics of the now dissolved USSR.

The history of this Slavic people, isolated and indoctrinated under a centralized and highly structured communist regime for almost 75 years, must be considered in the application process. Theirs is a unique mentality and personality, presenting challenges to the admissions officer, credential evaluator, foreign student adviser and dean. However, in this era of the global community, it is a nature we must understand and from which we can learn a great deal in terms of patience, perseverance and ingenuity.

Ten years ago the number of Soviet students studying in the U.S. was insignificant. That is changing. The

1990-1991 issue of *Open Doors*, published by the Institute of International Education, reports that in 1990, 1,210 students from the Soviet Union were in the U.S., ranking them 59th among all countries. Twenty-four percent were enrolled in two-year institutions; 76 percent in four-year institutions; 55.5 percent at public institutions; and 44.5 percent at private schools. Of these, 55.6 percent were undergraduates; 27.7 percent were graduates, and 16.7 percent were listed as "other." Of the 1,210 students, 294 were enrolled in English language programs.

The student from the former Soviet Republics is highly motivated to study in the United States. A degree from the U.S. is extremely valuable for future advancement, and the added allure of living in a Western country for a few years is compelling.

Consequently, access to the admission process is highly competitive. Ask any student from the former Soviet Union to explain how s/he managed to apply to a U.S. institution, take the TOEFL and GRE and obtain the necessary documents (i.e. external passport, exit visa, U.S. visa), and invariably the answer will be "luck!"

One reason is that class distinction is by no means absent from this supposedly classless society which espouses equality for all. In reality, sons and daughters of

Communist Party officials have had far more opportunity for study abroad than any other group. Bright, hard-working members of the Communist Youth Group Komsomol (now defunct) also had more access. Certain universities and institutes had networks into the application processes and were better able to steer their favored students through the complex, bureaucratic procedure.

Another interesting phenomenon is that people who are really outstanding academically are not treated well. Under communist ideology, to be really better than your peers is not good—and those who are perceived as exceptional are not given the chance to study abroad. A sort of reverse psychology is in operation here: "You are already privileged because of your talent and ability; why should you receive even more by studying abroad?" Hence, U.S. institutions may not always receive applications from the "best and the brightest," but from the lucky chosen few.

What kind of students, then, are these "lucky chosen few," and why do U.S. institutions want them?

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Publisher's Corner

American Higher Education: The Myth of Simplicity



U.S. higher education appears deceptively simple when described to a foreign audience. We have a single system, all disciplines are taught within the same institutions and lead to relatively few degrees.

Nothing could be further from the truth. A simple term like "college," so common in American parlance, is not readily understood by foreigners who view it as the name for lower-level institutions, below the university. Matters become even more complicated when it is explained that liberal arts colleges are at the top of the American undergraduate education hierarchy and that there is no set definition of the term university in the U.S. For example, Vincennes University in Indiana is a community college. Even though degrees in the U.S. bear the same names, it is no guarantee that they represent the same level or quality of education; each record must be viewed individually. What started out looking clear, simple and unified is, in fact, the most complex educational system in the world.

American professionals who work in higher education are aware of this complexity and have developed sophisticated methods for coping with it. Any seasoned admissions officer will tell you that knowing their applicant pool and deciding where and how individual students will fit at their institution is their main duty.

In most other countries the parity of institutions and degrees is often centrally guaranteed or mandated and no real assessment of candidates takes place at the local level. Admission to an institution is based on holding the requisite qualification.

When U.S. higher education is not understood abroad, students who return home with American degrees may encounter great difficulties in getting their credentials recognized. While it is true that there have been great success stories in Asia, in particular, we can't assume that U.S. higher education is understood everywhere, and that American degrees will always get their full value. Our profession spends a great deal of time and resources on collecting and disseminating information on foreign educational systems. We should be doing the same for U.S. higher education.

■ *Mariam Assefa*

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Afghanistan

The new Islamic government, which has ordered the reopening of all schools, does not seem to be in as big a hurry to see classes resume at Kabul University, which has been closed for three months. One reason is that many professors and students are not likely to embrace wholeheartedly the Islamic style of the Mujahedin.

When the university does reopen, it is expected that the curriculum will emphasize Islamic studies and that a mullah—a Muslim religious teacher or leader—may be appointed as rector. Some academics have said they will resist any attempt to impose Islamic fundamentalism on the university. (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 5/27/92)

Australia

Two institutions in Victoria, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and the Phillip Institute of Technology, have merged and acquired university status. The Swinburne Institute of Technology also was granted university status in April, becoming Victoria's seventh university, as well as its smallest with about 6,000 full-time students. (*The Australian*, 4/8/92)

Cambodia

When the Khmer Rouge forced residents to leave Phnom Penh for the countryside in the late 1970s so it could launch its agrarian-based classless society, university campuses here became ghost towns.

More than a million people died at the hands of the fanatical Communist regime, which held power from 1975 to 1979. Thousands of others fled to refugee camps across the border in Thailand. An estimated 96 percent of all college students in 1975 were killed, or escaped.

Last October warring factions signed a peace agreement in Paris officially ending 13 years of civil wars in Cambodia and calling for the repatriation of all refugees living in Thailand and free elections in the spring of 1993.

Refugee students have begun to trickle back to Cambodia, bringing problems. Education in the refugee camps was controlled by four different political factions which vilified and distrusted each other. The students, trained from an early age to be highly politicized by

these factions, are now thrown together at the universities. Several student demonstrations against what is considered a corrupt government have resulted in deaths.

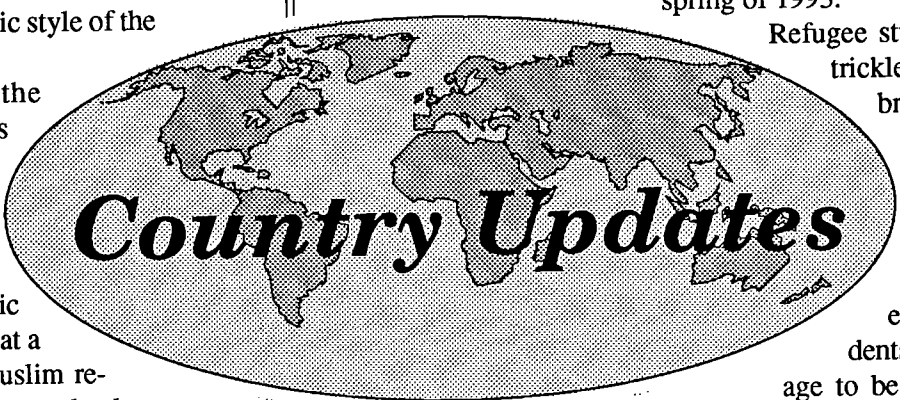
The universities lack books, desks and other basic supplies. About 75 percent of the country's 25,000 teachers and professors were killed or have fled. In many cases, ideologues have taken the place of teachers.

The government is broke. Its former chief patron, the Soviet Union, has dissolved and most Western countries are unwilling to grant or lend money to Phnom Penh. While half of Cambodia's population of 7.5 million is said to be under 17 years old, the nation's illiteracy rate is said to be among Asia's highest. Teachers have not received their paychecks in months while Cambodia continues to spend about 40 percent of its budget on defense. (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 4/22/92)

The International Development Program (IDP) of Australia has set up a center in Phnom Penh to teach English to university lecturers, students and government workers. The center also will provide instruction in English to businesses such as hotels and restaurants.

IDP has established the center as a commercial venture, but does not expect any returns for three years. Fees for English language courses will be set at market rates and paid by international aid agencies.

IDP Executive Director Dr. Denis Blight said Australia was leading the world with educational aid to Cambodia, and one of the highest priorities was English-language teaching so that Cambodians could communicate with the rest of Asia. The country's tattered education system was dealt a further blow last year when Russian and Vietnamese teachers packed up and left as the Soviet Union crumbled. (*Australian Campus Review Weekly* 2/20-26/92)



Country Updates

Canada

Two new nursing schools will open in British Columbia in 1993: one at the new University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) in Prince George, and the other at Trinity Western University in Langley.

At UNBC the department of nursing will reside within the faculty of health and human sciences. According to the plan, the faculty will use teaching techniques that have a strong emphasis on field placements, use the co-op education model and promote interdisciplinary skills. Both classroom and distance education will be used. The Bachelor of Nursing program offered will be a "laddered program" with the first two years offered at community college level.

At Trinity Western University the nursing school will be placed within the faculty of natural and applied sciences and will offer a bachelor of science in nursing programs focusing on community nursing, home care and care of the elderly. (*International Nursing Review*, Vol. 2/92)

China

China needs the expertise its students are gaining abroad and wants even those who demonstrated for democracy to return, a *People's Daily* editorial said recently.

The editorial marked the first time the official party newspaper issued an invitation for the student protesters to return. The party clearly doesn't embrace those for whom police issued arrest warrants after the 1989 Tiananmen Square democracy movement, for the government maintains they were trying to overthrow the socialist system. The welcome does apply to the thousands of students in the United States, Europe and Japan who demonstrated in support of the democracy movement and against the army crack-down, and who have extended their foreign visas for fear of being punished upon returning to China.

Since 1987, 150,000 Chinese have gone to study overseas, but only one-third have returned. About 40,000 are studying in the U.S. (*Associated Press*, 3/20/92)

China's 1,000-plus universities and colleges will enroll 626,000

students this year, an increase of several thousand over last year.

Priority will be given to ensuring the enrollment of the best talents in such key disciplines as teacher training, agriculture, forestry, mineral mining and hydro-power construction.

Only those who hold high school graduation diplomas, have passed the standardized college entrance examinations scheduled in July and are deemed morally, intellectually and physically fit may be admitted to institutions of higher learning. (*China Daily*, 3/2/92)

Over 114,000 people have enrolled in post-graduate courses this year, a jump of 23 percent over last year. The unexpected surge in enrollments is attributed to the country's rapid economic development and the need for better educated workers. Another factor is the "cooling down" of the fever to go abroad, possibly because it is more difficult to get scholarships to overseas universities. (*China Daily*, 3/17/92)

