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Diary of a Revolution

By Derek Law

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On Friday 16 August 1991 I turned up at Heathrow which was full of librarians heading for Moscow to attend the International Federation of Library Associations Conference.

The trip into Moscow confirmed the press and television reports of a country in rapid decline — official cars with bits missing; potholes in the main roads; torrential rain; sewers unable to deal with it; queues everywhere and shops with nothing in the windows. The hotel, in which I had first stayed some twenty years ago, looked as though it hadn't had a coat of paint since then, although it is the main hard currency hotel.

Over breakfast on the Saturday we discussed the night's collection of cockroaches and mosquitoes, before taking a bus to the conference centre. The first day passed in a blur of committee meetings and elections before a dinner with some French colleagues. In the hotel, where we had to book in advance, our possession of a camera made us instant members of two wedding parties, since otherwise they would have had no wedding photographs.

On Sunday morning there were committees, followed by the main plenary session. In the afternoon an American colleague and I were taken on a tour of the city by a Russian colleague. The openness and frankness of discussion were clearly relished by our Russian host. We asked about Gorbachev and how things had improved since Brezhnev's day. Gorbachev's unpopularity was confirmed with a joke. Under Brezhnev the Soviet economy was taken to the very edge of the abyss; under Gorbachev we are poised for a great leap forward. In the evening a small group of us strolled back to the hotel via a beautiful Red Square bathed in moonlight, and I passed the remark, which will haunt me for years, that this didn't feel like a city on the edge of revolution.

The next morning, rumours swept round the breakfast room that Gorbachev had been deposed in a bloodless *coup*. At first this seemed to be the regrettable but inevitable replacement of an unpopular leader, leaving the structure of government unchanged.

The conference proper began and one paper, by a Moscow colleague, studied changes in librarians' attitudes at times of crisis like 1905 and 1917 — with an

impromptu consideration of 1991 added to the pre-circulated version. 'Saying things I might not be able to say tomorrow', is how he put it. It began to dawn on us that the situation was far from resolved.

At lunchtime we returned by bus to the town centre for the formal opening of the conference and found tanks deploying in the streets around the Kremlin. 'Phone lines had gone dead (although they were later restored) and it was rumoured that the airports were closed and that ten thousand people had been arrested. It was now clearly more than a simple replacement of the head of state.

We pressed on with the official opening ceremony in a huge auditorium where an obviously worried Minister of Culture paced on and off the platform of dignitaries then struck the first bizarre note of a very bizarre week when he apologised for the *coup d'état* and hoped that they would manage to hold it quietly so that our important bibliographic deliberations would not be disturbed.

Outside, things seemed calmer again and tourists were beginning to edge forward boldly to be photographed next to the tanks. The British delegation decided that it would be prudent to let the Embassy know that there was a party of forty British citizens in town. A telephone call elicited a polite apology but regretted that the Embassy was closed!

In the early evening, there was an official reception, notable mainly for the sad sight of Russian librarians storming the tables to fill bags with food and drink for their families. This was followed by a gala ballet performance of Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*. Later we went on the streets, talked to Russians in the crowds near Red Square, leaned casually against tanks and persuaded soldiers to let us through the cordon so that we could photograph colleagues from 'behind the lines'. We saw middle-aged women telling young soldiers 'We could be your mothers — surely you won't shoot us?' The soldiers maintained an embarrassed silence or muttered about 'Orders are orders'.

On Tuesday we were up at six for breakfast and to listen to the World Service News on CNN. They clearly knew no more than we did — an interesting revelation. The situation had clearly worsened overnight for it took two hours to reach the conference centre by bus, through barricades of trolley-buses and tanks. The tension was quite palpable but some Russians trying to get to work complained about the tank jams. Moscow has a population of about eight million people and the highest estimate I have seen for those resisting was half a million, which means that in the middle of this revolution, seven and a half million people were trying to conduct their ordinary lives. Our Russian hosts made it clear that some tank crews had declared for Yeltsin and positioned their tanks outside the White House. Civil War was now possible and it was obviously expected to be grim, bloody and prolonged.

At the conference I attempted to chair a session on Disaster Control Planning but even that title could not draw a crowd. The conference had now become a fiction except as a focus for rumour.

Some delegates were leaving as fast as they could book a flight, some could not get into the country, many delegates and speakers could not get to the papers on time and so there seemed little to do but join Russian colleagues in an expedition through the barricades to the first big meeting at the Russian White House. Yeltsin was not yet present but inspiring speeches came from politicians, actors, priests and even a champion wrestler. Yelena Bonner (Andrei Sakharov's widow) spoke of 'My Moscow, Our Moscow'; a barrage balloon now flew over the White House, carrying the Russian flag as a sign of defiance. It also served to advertise the free radio station 'now broadcasting on 1500 kilohertz'.

Librarians are professionally involved in information and the flow of information. It is our professional lifeblood. It had been therefore absolutely fascinating to watch how information moved around the city while official television channels showed only an old film of the Bolshoi Ballet Company performing *Swan Lake*, followed by the *Bridge on the River Kwai* and *Clockwork Orange*, in endless succession. John Simpson of the BBC kept turning up and asking us if we had any information and CNN clearly knew little. As for the press, the old saying applied that there is no truth in *Pravda* and no news in *Izvestia*. We subsisted on a diet of Yeltsin's radio and fly posters. Then the news came that Bush and Major had come out in support of Yeltsin. As importantly the story spread by word of mouth that Leningrad was resisting. Although the story also came that a new tank column was said to be approaching Moscow from the Polish border, there was an air of euphoria. If Moscow and Leningrad stood firm right must ultimately triumph. Yeltsin announced from the top of a tank at the White House 'They can make a throne of bayonets but they cannot sit on it'.

By late afternoon we made our way back to the hotel on foot amid bizarre sights such as tanks parked outside Macdonalds and a tank column stopping for a red traffic light! Fifty delegates waved passes to enter Red Square and St Basil's Cathedral for an ecumenical service, in full Russian Orthodox style which to our astonishment was permitted and resulted in a deeply moving experience. It took us four hours to find a way round all the road blocks. Huge crowds were talking to the soldiers, passing flysheets and little Russian flags to put on the tanks. It was difficult to see these young boys shooting their own people, but equally difficult to see them having the strength of character to refuse to obey an order to shoot. In the metro, crowds still clustered round fly-posted notices from the underground press. In the hotel our evening meal was shortened by news of a curfew, again passed by word of mouth, although in the event few seemed to take it seriously. Groups gathered in corners of the hotel sharing information and gossip. Most noticeable of these were huddles of Russian *émigrés* returned for a major meeting. Many, grey with fear, and worried for their lives and families, and by the uncertainty of the day's events.

Wednesday morning was the low point in a week of great emotional swings. There was firing overnight and an assault on the barricades. By now, grim-faced Russian colleagues after spending two nights on the barricades were in despair.

The conference began to disintegrate as more delegates ran for home or were ordered home by their governments. (Russians burst into applause when one American tried to extend his stay.) Emergency meetings were convened in corners to finish official IFLA business. It looked as if serious fighting might break out. A Government reception was due in the Kremlin in the evening but most people decided to boycott it rather than appear to support the new regime. By early afternoon a leaflet was circulating in the streets reporting Moscow City Council's condemnation of last night's deaths and its demand for the withdrawal of troops from the city. The talk was all of armed conflict and a dreadful civil war.

Quite suddenly at 3 pm it was announced that the *coup* was over. Great waves of emotion swept through the city. The streets were suddenly empty of tanks and soldiers. The reception was still on and by 5.30 pm we were in the Kremlin. By 6.30, drunk on the sheer adrenalin of the occasion, we were doing the conga through its Palace of Congresses. We strolled back to the hotel in a mood of euphoria, at one point singing, with huge inappropriateness but great feeling 'The Red Flag'. Fortunately, we sing it to the 'White Cockade', a much better tune and less likely to cause offence.

On Thursday the television stations were back to normal, a sure sign that all was well. They included adverts for the St Petersburg Lawn Tennis Championship—another curious indicator of change. The restored conference stumbled on in a welter of emotional workshops. One session had a minute's silence for the dead and cheered its interpreter wildly when she apologised for her mistakes, due to having spent two nights on the barricades. A television was set up at the back of the room so that everyone could watch CNN's dramatic reporting and hear Gorbachev's press conference. With yet more emotional scenes we were all presented with certificates marking the fact that we had stayed. Although most of us simply felt privileged to have been in Moscow during these great events, the Russians were clearly deeply moved that we had stayed and supported them. Their overwhelming emotion seemed to be of astonishment at what they had done. They realised that people can stand up against governments and take their fate in their hands and influence the future of their country.

In the afternoon there was a march on Red Square, notable among other things for the most senior British librarian apparently leading the mob. That evening a large party of us had a celebratory dinner with some Russian colleagues, during which the British contingent was invited up on a stage to sing 'Yesterday' then to dance to rapturous applause. To round the evening off, we strolled up the street to take part in the demolition of Dzerzhinsky's statue in front of the Lubianka. Again it was interesting how we appeared to get to the main scene of activity by some sort of osmosis of information. Fireworks went off everywhere and the police helped organise the cranes removing this awesome symbol of oppression. The night was wild with celebration.

On Friday there was time to acquire a few souvenirs (Yeltsin dolls which

featured Gorbachev *inside* the larger Yeltsin were now collectors' items) before the formal closing session. The Russians were beginning to enjoy their *coup*. One conspirator had tried and failed to commit suicide. The popular view was that this was quite in character; 'he was a lousy government minister, he was a lousy plotter of *coups* and it's no surprise that he is lousy at committing suicide'. The Russian conference organisers were congratulated on their achievement in the most difficult circumstances imaginable. In turn they were clearly deeply grateful for the support from foreign delegates. The Minister of Culture reappeared and was loudly applauded for having refused to serve under 'these people'.

On Saturday — our last day, the funeral parade of the three victims of the fighting filled the Manege Square. At the Kremlin, the Russian and the Soviet flag now flew. Everyone knew that a watershed in the future of their country had been reached, but the future remained deeply obscure. This was the final great assembly of the week: a mood of thanksgiving within the tragedy pervaded the crowd.

Then it was out to the airport. On board the British Airways flight, the cabin crew were the first to express envy at our being there 'when it happened' and tall tales were already beginning to emerge as we headed for safety. As our plane landed at Heathrow, there was a very un-British burst of applause from the passengers — a release of tension that had not been fully cast off in the last few days. One hour later I was home and on the 'phone being interviewed by a cousin who works for the *Sunday Post*. I didn't quite get the 'Aberdeen Man drowns, Titanic sinks' treatment alleged to have appeared in the *Press and Journal*; but I made Page 2 with 'Arbroath Man Congas in Kremlin'.

The week had been wholly surreal. It was perhaps the most intoxicating and emotional week of my life. We had been privileged to participate in making history instead of buying it for others to read in the library.

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