

Russia and the Gospels—1

MYTHS

by Desmond Ford

My journey to Russia exploded many of my myths about the country and its people. I discovered that the country is in the Third World. Its precious people, however, prevail over every hardship.



For years, mushroom clouds from the world's two superpowers hovered over our globe. For most of our lives, the nations of the world have spent billions of dollars every year—hundreds of billions—because of the threat of World War III.

That money, misspent on preparation for war, could have wiped out all poverty in the Third World, where 40,000 children die every 24 hours.

Now, the shadow of World War III has suddenly lifted! It is a miraculous thing!

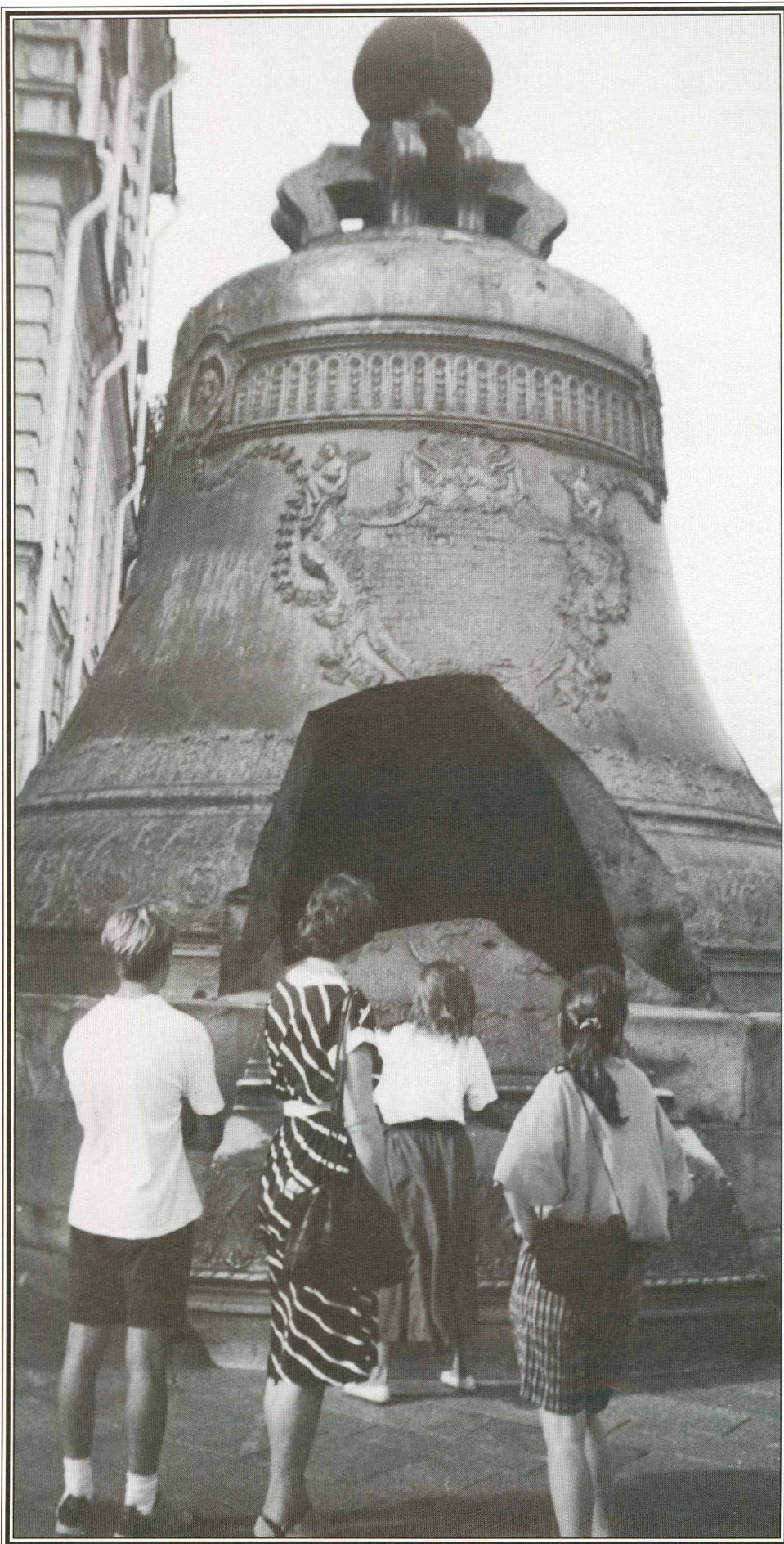
Wondering About Russia

As I faced the prospect of traveling to Russia, I wondered how many of the popular myths about the former superpower I would find accurate. Things are rarely what they seem. There is often a tremendous difference between appearance and real-

ity. The truth about things in this world is never pure and seldom simple.

A man pushed a supermarket cart down the cereal aisle. The cart was full, not only with groceries, but with a squawking, shrieking, baby. “Now, George,” cooed the man, “control yourself. George, don’t scream. Self-control is the thing, George. Don’t scream.”

A woman shopper overheard,



and was impressed. "What patience you have with little George," she said admiringly. "Lady," said the man, "I'm George!"

Things are rarely what they seem, and I wondered about Russia.

Myths About Russia

- During the Cold War, I had heard much anti-red propaganda and took it for granted that everything in the USSR was bad. Of course, that was not true. Everything is not bad. There was employment for everybody. There were accommodations for everybody. There was food for everybody. There was transportation for all, and it was cheap.

I traveled all night from New York to Moscow, and it cost \$600.00. I traveled all the next night in Russia, and it cost \$2.00. If I try to get accommodations in the U.S. for a week—well, let's say a month; you can't have a good vacation in a week—it will cost at least \$600.00. In Russia, it would cost about \$6.00.

So the myth that everything is bad is not true.

- I wondered, "Is everyone over there a Communist?" In 1936, there were two million Communists. When Communism collapsed in 1991, there were 15 million.

Most people in the USSR are not, were not, and never would be Communists. In the USSR, there were at least 300 million people. In the satellite states there was as many again. Yet, only 15 million of them were Communists.

Then I wondered, "What are these Communists like? Are they all a bad lot?" The answer is, No. Many joined Communism because they were idealistic people who hated the exploitation of the weak by the strong. Many, many people all over the world joined Communism for idealistic reasons.

- Then I wondered, "Is current Communism what Marx and Lenin had in mind?" The answer is, "No, not at all."

Karl Marx would have been one of the first shot after the Revolution. Marx longed for a state led by workers controlled by democratic processes—a state in which there would be no exploitation. He wouldn't have survived the Revolution.

Some bright-eyed Communists

warned Lenin early to beware of the Revolution degenerating into despotism. He wrote in later life, "I have wronged the Russian people. We had a terrible bureaucracy under the czar and now we have one that is worse."

- Then I wondered, "Are there any Christians over there?"

That land had state-sponsored atheism for 70 years. Not long before the collapse, the government investigated the number of Christians in the country. They found that approximately 40 percent of the population was professedly Christian. That is well over 100 million people!

Facts About the Late USSR

Here are a few facts about the late USSR:

It was the biggest country in the world. It covered one-sixth of the earth's surface.

It was the richest country on earth in natural resources. In my ignorance I thought it was just poor terrain under snow and ice much of the year.

It covered 11 time zones. When you travel to Russia, it is the worst time wrench ever, if you come from the USA or Australia. It takes the body one day to adjust for every time zone you violate. If you go there for two weeks, you adjust about the time you are due to come home! Then you start again.

It had the third largest population in the world, after China and India.

It was not just one country, but 107 nations! Some Muslim, some Christian (mostly Russian Orthodox).

Facts About Russia Today

Now for today.

Russia is a Third World country. I never knew that before I went.

The only thing that worked efficiently in the late USSR was the military machine. It occupied the time of nearly three million people. Remember, the Russians had the atom bomb by 1949.

There are approximately 20 million more women than men in Russia today. The average man lives 10 years less than the average man in the USA. That's because he drinks and smokes more.

There are over one million physi-

cians in the former USSR. Thirty thousand of them do nothing but abortions. Notice, there are 30,000 abortions every day.

An abortion costs \$8.00. The average woman has seven abortions. Every year, 3,500 teenagers become pregnant and 2,000 have abortions.

Of the 18,000 hospitals, 12,000 don't have hot water. I spoke in one such hospital. I visited the patients, prayed with them, talked with them through an interpreter. I have never seen a hospital so stark, so empty of everything except beds, patients, and IV stands. Antibiotics are rare. Band-Aids are rare. Hospitals recycle their syringes.

People Not Statistics

It can be confusing to talk only about statistics. For what I saw in Russia were lovers walking arm-in-arm through the parks. What I saw were parents and children playing.

As I mixed with Russian people, I found those who are choleric as I am, those sanguine like some of my friends, those melancholic and phlegmatic. All familiar types were represented.

In other words, I found they are just like us—except they are a little more patient. They are certainly more patient than I am! And stronger.

MADness

I thought of the West's policy of MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction) during the Cold War. "If your leader sends a nuclear weapon our way, we will strike back and wipe you out."

I thought, "What madness!"

Often, Russian politicians are not good people. But that's true of some of our leaders in Australia and the USA. At least 50 percent of people believe that. Yet we were saying, "Because of your less-than-one-tenth of 1 percent who are bad, we will kill the rest of you." MADness. I found the Russian people just as we are—and very kind.

Apartment Living

Most people there live in apartments. Sometimes, two families dwell in one apartment—and the apartment may be only three rooms!

Stalin wanted to bring the peasants off the land. When Lenin took

command there were only three million urban workers. Even today, 99 percent of the country is rural. But Stalin succeeded in bringing 25 million peasants into the cities.

He collectivized the farms, took the workers off the farms, brought them into the cities, put them in apartments, and made promises that he never kept.

I stayed in one apartment where 10 children lived with their parents, and the toilets and running water worked only half a day (if things were going well). When you entered the apartment door, you saw the shoes all lined up. The tiny shoes, the bigger shoes, the bigger ones yet—all 12 pairs of shoes. Mine added the 13th!

In another city, a minister took me into an apartment of two rooms and a bathroom. He took me into one of the two rooms. There was a three-quarter size bed and a small bed. He pointed to the three-quarter bed, and pointed to me. It was to be my bed.

It was, of course, his bed. And his wife's. But he pointed to the small bed, then to himself. He didn't say anything about his wife (we couldn't speak one another's language anyway). She slept in the kitchen! If I had offered to sleep in the kitchen instead, they would have been offended.

When I think of the Russian people, I think of little things like that.

I think of being in the woods, playing ball games with the young people. Suddenly, I feel tired because of the jet lag. I tiptoe away and lie down in the grass. Someone comes after me and covers me with a comforter.

I think of shivering (in what I thought was early autumn) and a young man, Dennis, taking off his coat and throwing it around me. I think of a woman who walked miles to get something for me when she knew I had injured my knee in a fall. Before I left, she smuggled into my luggage bottles of boiled water she had bought.

These are the people I think of when I think of Russia.

More Statistics

Let's think of some more statistics.

Of the 18,000 hospitals, 5,000 don't have sewers, and 3,000 not even running water!

There are 15,000 churches, mostly

structures that belong to the Russian Orthodox Church. You say, "That's not bad. I didn't think there were any church buildings in Russia at all." In the USA, which is half the size, there are 350,000 church buildings.

There are 152,000 theaters. Why so many? Because the theater is the one place they can escape drabness. They can escape the Third World, and get away and forget there are so many things they can't have. It costs them next to nothing to attend the theater.

One thousand illegal stills are confiscated every day by the police. About 50,000 Russians die every year from alcohol poisoning from those home stills.

Millions drink polluted water. Typhoid is rampant in some places.

Twenty million children suffer from easy-to-diagnose diseases resulting from pollution. In their rush to industrialize, the Soviets poisoned their air, sea, land, and people. If you ask, "What is the future for Russia?" the answer is, "It will take decades—perhaps generations—to bring the country back to normal."

Literate Population

Russia, I repeat, is a Third World country. Yet it is a Third World country with a literate population. People love to read.

As a rule, you don't see bookstores as you do here. What you see is a card table on the walkway. There are Russian grandmothers with scarves over their heads, carrying their buckets of tomatoes and other food supplies—and there on the walk is a card table with books for sale.

The only place I found significantly different was in Red Square. There were some beautiful stores there, but they looked as if they were from outer space! They took only hard currency (such as American dollars). They were definitely not for Russians.

Money Woes

The Russians don't advertise their goods because they don't have any to offer. Most Russians cannot even find necessities. According to *Current History* magazine, in its report about what happened after the collapse of Communism, 99 percent of the population was

bankrupted overnight. Inflation is about 2,000 percent a year.

When I set off for Russia, I asked at the bank, "How many rubles to the dollar?" The bank official answered, "151." Three weeks later, just before I left Russia, it was 210. It is now over 800.

As the rate increases every month, their money becomes more worthless. Usually, they don't have calculators, so it takes a long time to buy anything significant as you have to hand over handfuls of almost worthless paper money.

It reminded me of Germany during the 1920s. What happened in Germany just before World War II is happening in Russia.

The gross national product is falling 20 percent a year in Russia. Imagine the situation where most people are bankrupt and only 1 or 2 percent of the people can make ends meet. There are no consumer goods advertised in most places. How do people survive?

The People Prevail

They grow their own.

I saw hardly anything come out of a bottle (true, I wasn't with the vodka drinkers), and nothing from a package or can.

The Russians are allotted land outside the cities where anyone can grow food. I saw old and young people carrying home buckets of food they had raised.

They live on fresh food. It's what keeps them alive. They call potatoes their "second bread." Many old people have only bread and potatoes.

Whole regions of Russia are without heat or light. Much of the country is an ecological wilderness.

No wonder there are 21 million alcoholics, 18 million of them men.

The average wage was \$9.00 a month. (Remember, that all-night train trip I took cost only \$2.00.) Monthly rent, just a few dollars. The average pension, \$1.50.

Those wages have now not gone up, but the money has gone down in value. Most are bankrupt.

But they are tough people. They know how to laugh, fortunately.

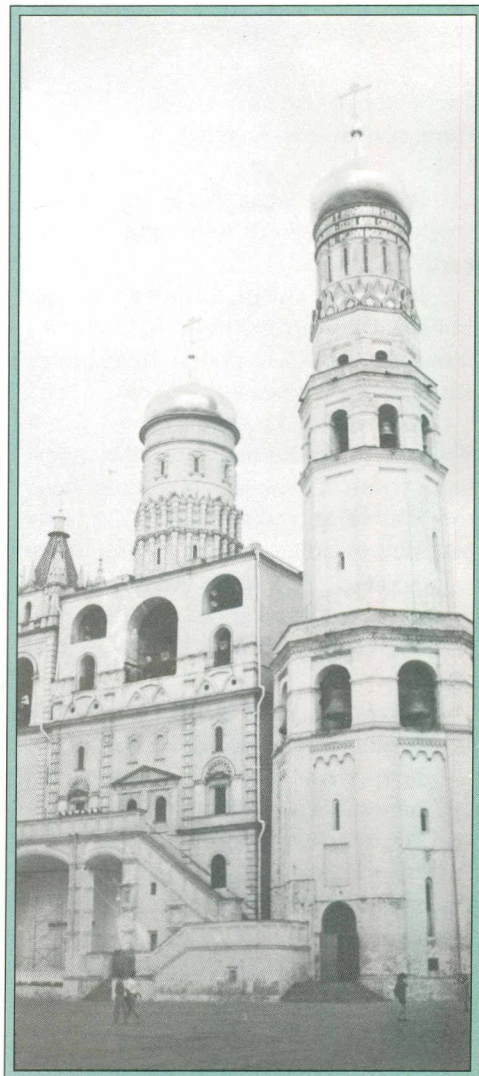
Collectivized farming has never

worked. They joke, "The government pretends to pay us, and we pretend to work."

They tell about an American, a Pole, and a Russian. They are asked, "What's your opinion about the shortage of pork in Poland?"

The American answers, "What's a shortage?" The Pole answers, "What's pork?" The Russian answers, "What's an opinion?"

They know how to laugh. I will never forget the Russian people. ♦



These three articles are a report given by Dr. Ford in Australia. Dr. Ford's report was on his 1992 trip to the former USSR. The report was transcribed by Daisy Stanley. GNU distributed 4,000 Russian-language New Testaments at the meetings held in Russia. Thank you for making this possible.