

The Land of No: Janne Seletto

We saw the guard towers as soon as the bus crossed the border.

“They want to know,” the tour leader said, “they want to know exactly where we are, all the time. We give them an itinerary beforehand and we have to stick to it. Absolutely stick to it.”

It was 1980, we had just started a bus tour of the Soviet block, and already we were scared.

As we got closer to Moscow I noticed lanes in the middle of the road with no one using them. “Yeah,” said the guide, “that’s for the politburo. Everyone else is banned.”

Moscow itself was drab and unloved. We knew that in the USSR it was illegal to privately own property or a business, and this was the result. Nobody owned anything and nobody took responsibility. It was a train wreck.

It was drab, but it was still Moscow and we all wanted souvenirs. We headed to Red Square, the spectacular expanse which is the centre of everything in Moscow. There was shockingly little to buy, but there were Mishka Bears. These were the symbol of the Moscow Olympic Games, which was held later that year.

But the bears didn’t come easy. To walk out with one under your arm, you had to line up three times. First at the counter where they were sold, then at the cashier to pay, then back at the counter again to collect the toy. And if they had sold out, which was likely, that was just bad luck. We decided common sense, not to mention consumer rights, had been banned too.

The Mishka shop was shabby, but our next stop was surprisingly chic. It was a Beryozka store and it had no queues and no Russians. It sold caviar and champagne and was only open to tourists and party officials who had access to Western cash. Muscovites, who only had roubles, were banned! And this was Communism - where everyone was equal!

Of course, the Beryozka store, private property, private enterprise, the centre lanes in the highway and the right to alter your journey, weren’t the only prohibitions.

Also on the forbidden list: freedom of speech, dissent, free labor unions, opposition political parties, travel outside the Soviet block and religion. Books, poems, theatre,

opera, ballet, music, films, art, TV, radio, newspapers, magazines and fashion were heavily censored and often banned outright.

Coca-Cola was banned because it represented American imperialism, but Pepsi was OK.

In the end so much of life was forbidden that nothing was left, except the police propping the edifice up. And in 1989 in Berlin, it started to fall...

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