



**Light in
the darkness of**

Russia

Article and Photography by Randy Hurst

I remember the darkness of Lenin's tomb. Black and deep red marble walls were an appropriate background in the dimly lighted sepulcher. The room was silent except for the soft footfalls of those walking slowly around the glass-encased body of communism's foremost icon.

Looking at Lenin's face in the soft light, I tried to imagine how many had suffered misery and death because of the ideology he inflicted on humanity, especially on the Russian people.

This was the man who wrote to Russian novelist Maxim Gorki in 1913: "Every religious idea, every idea of God ... is unutterable vileness ... of the most dangerous kind ... the most abominable kind. Millions of sins, filthy deeds, acts of violence ... are far less dangerous than the subtle spiritual idea of God."

Just seven decades later, the empire Lenin helped to build crumbled on its own foundations. Angry citizens of the former Soviet Union vandalized his images. In an especially profound irony, a bronze statue of Lenin was melted down and forged into church bells.

The fall of Soviet communism was extensive and swift. For my generation, who grew up during the Cold War, it was hard to believe. I remember the dread we felt when television relayed pictures of nuclear missiles parading through Red Square and Nikita Khrushchev's ominous threat: "We will bury you!" The Cuban missile crisis made us feel we were actually on the brink of a third world war.

The events since communism's fall in 1989 are complex. Capitalism and free enterprise ushered in opportunities for previously unknown prosperity and freedom. But these ideals have been accompanied by mounting crime

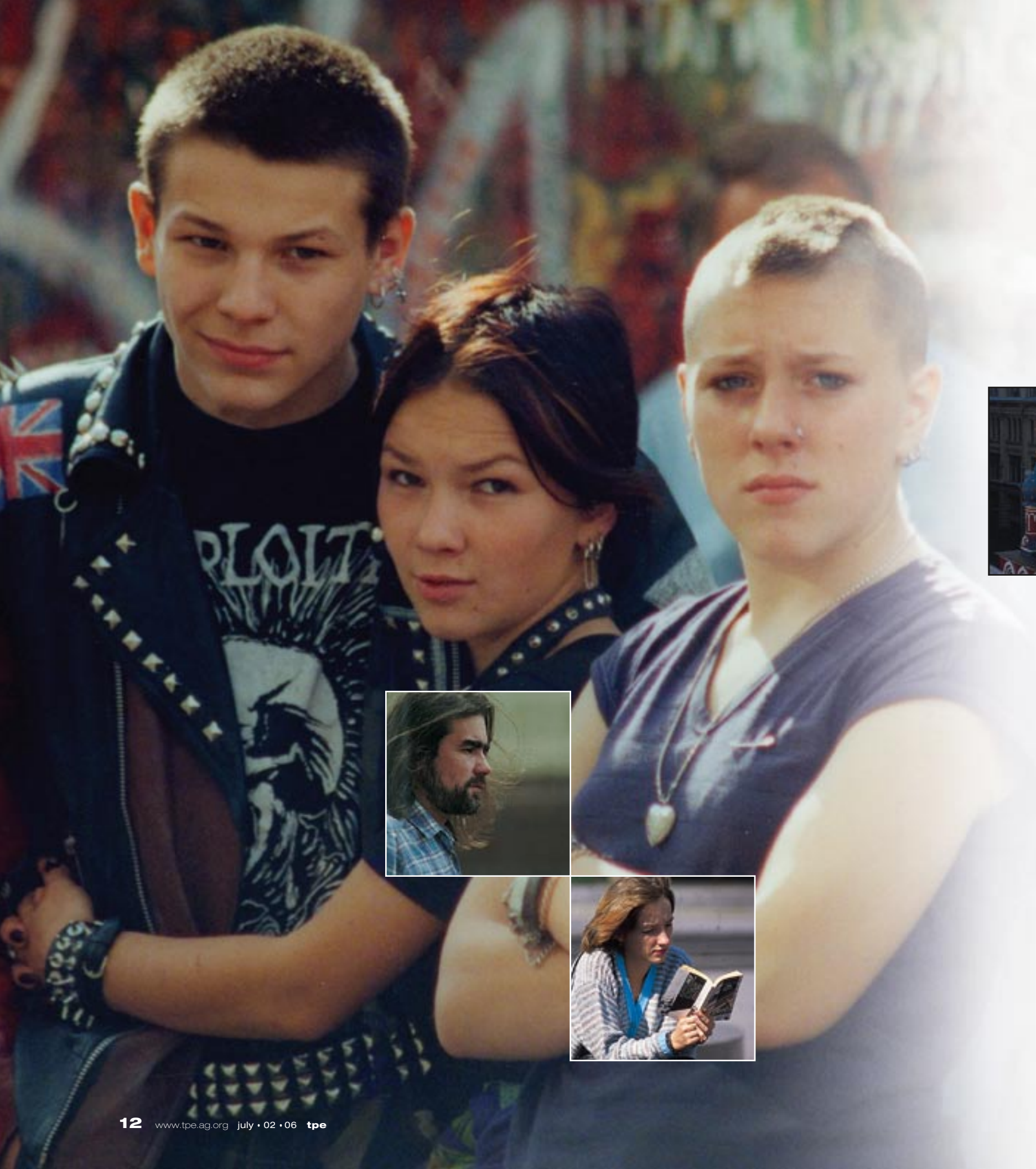
and moral decadence. Russia has new kinds of suffering. Though Moscow boasted a shopping mall as lavish as any I had seen in America, its customers were relatively few. A hundred yards from the mall entrance, elderly Russians demonstrated with red flags of the former Soviet Union, demanding a return to communism. In the new Russian economy, many have lost their pensions and any security they had.

Moscow is home to thousands of millionaires. Some Russians have money to spend on the latest designer goods from Paris, London and Rome. But far more live on the edge of poverty. The inequity was obvious on the streets. Old women shuffled slowly, begging with outstretched hands. But they looked surprisingly unlike beggars. The brightly colored scarves tied tightly under their chins glittered with twinkling metallic threads, looking incongruous with the women's drab, well-worn coats and sorrowful faces.

My most compelling memory of Moscow is the crowded alleyway where I was confronted with the tragic state of many Russian youth. More than 100 young people lounged in front of graffiti-covered brick walls, clustered around a rock band. They appeared to be aimless and unfulfilled — spiritually

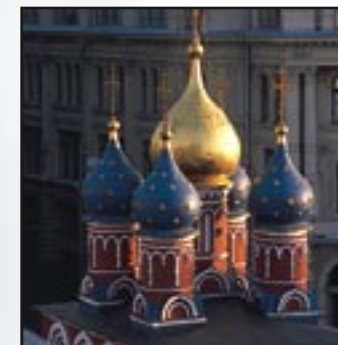
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destitute — grasping for significance with little hope of finding it.

Occasional glances met mine. Their faces were young, but their countenances betrayed innocence stolen early in life, attitudes ranging from indifference to hostility. They looked anesthetized, seeking solace in the harsh, even brutal, electronic sounds. Dressed in faded denim and black leather, they bore no resemblance to the happy young couple in wedding attire I had seen that morning near Red Square.



Weddings, once limited to civil ceremonies, can now take place in reopened churches. Orthodox imagery survived the decades of official atheism. The communist regime tolerated the church as a fading institution where old women bow to kiss religious icons. Because young people have seen these devotional statues and portraits of Jesus Christ, they vaguely know that He lived. But most of the pictures they see are of His crucifixion. They imagine Christ as a teacher with a noble cause, a good man who died. They don't know Him as He is — the risen Son of God and Savior of the world. Although Easter is a major holiday in Russia, few Russians know a personal relationship with Jesus.

Ornate orthodox churches with domes covered in gold leaf appeared strangely out of place amid the cold, functional architecture of communism. When asked what they think of the church, young people on the street were not hostile toward the traditional church. They were merely indifferent. In spiritually impoverished modern Russia, a gold-domed religion is simply irrelevant.

Thankfully, Russia has another side. Worship services at Holy Trinity Church in Moscow brought a bright

ray of hope. The sun shone outside, but the countenances of the Pentecostal believers inside the church were even more memorable. During worship and prayer, their faces conveyed reverent joy. Hands were folded in submissive adoration.

Russian singing is impossible to describe. Whether it is the nature of the Russian language or that the Christians' singing has been tempered by their suffering, it stirs the soul. During worship and prayer, facial expressions revealed intent devotion. When opportunity was given, believers greeted one another with tender affection.

After the service, Pastor Vasily shared a brief history of his family and the church. Vasily's father accepted Christ in prison while serving a 20-year sentence for participation in the national opposition party in the former Soviet Union. He was granted early release when Stalin died in 1953. Returning home, he became an ordained minister. Arrested and fired from his job in the mid-1970s, he started services in his home that grew to an underground church of 300.

For several years, the congregation worshipped without interference. Then the KGB ordered them to stop holding services. They even made a propagandist movie about them. Since the church was unregistered at the time, Vasily's father lived under constant pressure of exposure and punishment. For 22 years the congregation worshipped in the forest, even in winter. Members didn't know where in the forest they would meet until early Sunday morning. When they went to a particular metro station, someone would give them directions. Water baptisms were held at night.

Experiencing present-day Russia, it is difficult to mentally grasp the circumstances and atmosphere in which Christians lived under communism. I interviewed another man, Viktor, whose father was a Pentecostal



pastor in a small Russian town. When Viktor was just a year old, KGB agents burst into his family's home at 4 a.m. Searching the house, they found a Bible. Viktor's father was arrested, tried and sentenced to six years of hard labor.

When the father finally returned from prison, he was gaunt and emaciated. The family didn't even recognize him until they heard his voice.

I found the father's story very moving. Then I asked, "What was it like to be a pastor's son under communism?"

Viktor explained that, when he was 10, he refused to take the red scarf of the Pioneers, the first phase of joining the Communist Youth Party. If he agreed to take the pledge, he would have to deny the God his father had taught him to love and serve. The boy's communist teacher brought him in front of 360 fellow students. She slapped his face back and forth, mocking him. "You are stupid because you are a Christian," she shouted. "You will never have an education. All you will ever do is drive a horse wagon."

During that era, a child was a hero if he betrayed his friends who were disloyal to communism. Young Pioneers spied on those who attended church on Sunday and told their communist teachers on Monday. The teachers would order the Christian children to stand in class and publicly ridicule them before the other students.

I asked Viktor if he had ever gone back to his village. His face brightened. He said he had recently returned. The school was still there, but dilapidated, unpainted for many years. His former teachers, now old women, were also there. They didn't recognize him, of course, but when he told them who he was they remembered him ... the pastor's son.

I asked, "What did you say to those teachers who treated you so cruelly?"

"Not much," he replied, "I just gave them flowers."

To these people, a gift of flowers is a warm, affectionate gesture. "And what did they say then?" I asked.

He smiled. "They lowered their faces and asked me to forgive them for how they had treated me."

He did forgive them ... and more. His former teachers poured out their hearts to him. They had no funds left for school supplies; and since the fall of communism, their pensions were gone.

The boy they had once persecuted now personally paid to have his old school repainted. He even contacted other students and helped establish a pension fund for the teachers, contributing generously himself.

Did his acts of forgiveness have any effect?

Two of his former teachers are now Christians and attend the church his father once pastored.

The darkness of Lenin's tomb is unforgettable. So are the dimly lit hallways in public buildings. But most of all, I remember the spiritual darkness in the faces of the Russian people.

Remembering the darkness, I pray for the Light — for more messengers to take the good news about Jesus to a place spiritually destitute for so many decades.

Soviet communism was a long, dark night for Russia. But God has provided a window of time through which the light of the gospel can shine, penetrating the darkness that has gripped Russia's soul. **tpe**

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