

Soviet Bomber Over Boston Spa

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The use of ex-military soviet aircraft to speed information transfer between West and East was one of the more startling proposals I encountered on a recent visit to Moscow. The proposed plane could fly direct from Northern England carrying inter library loans stopping off at Schipol airport in the Netherlands to pick up consolidated periodicals post bound for the Soviet Union. It would also be able to transport passengers. My Moscow hosts assured me that their relationship with their own international airport was very good.

Originally I had been invited to the Soviet Union by ICSTI (International Centre for Scientific and Technical Information) to discuss improved East-West co-operation on information, and no doubt my previous visit to Moscow and my position as committee member of the UKSG had assisted the invitation. During my stay I was able to outline the activities of the UKSG and stress that it was probably now the most important co-operative initiative in Western Europe addressing the transfunctional nature of the information chain. I was also pleased to confirm arrangements for Soviet participation in our forthcoming first European Serials Conference in the Netherlands in September. So what have the Soviets to offer on information? And what do we have to offer them?

It would appear that science in the Soviet Union operates at two levels - highly professional and organised in such sectors as the space industry and aviation - but with major problems in the would-be mass production and marketing sectors. On more than one occasion Soviet contacts confided that they felt that some of their inventions were so advanced that they could only be successfully exploited by Western manufacturers, and they were actually looking for partners. Until recently joint ventures have been all the rage, but now under the new business laws they were working to set up their own stock companies, and therein lay some intriguing possibilities for the West. The current reaction against centralisation has released a great enthusiasm for entrepreneurship - in one recent survey 32% of the Soviet public actually wanted to own their own business - and in some cases these desires have taken concrete form. For example

ICSTI itself, which has representatives from most East European countries, now regards itself as a self-financing body prepared to make an operating profit or "surplus" and paying out bonuses to its 300 or so highly qualified employees. Last year it had a turnover of 3 million roubles and a surplus of 600,000. Even more interesting is that it sees the possibilities of Western companies or co-operatives purchasing a shareholding, which would give them a say in the running of a more internationalised organisation. The idea that CD ROM companies such as Silver Platter, UMI, and Chadwyck Healey, or serials agents, or even the British Library could be on the inside looking out is very exciting. Perhaps the "co-operative initiative addressing the transfunctional nature of the information chain" could also have a role.

Inevitably, the talk got round to "valuta", that almost universal word for hard currency. In spite of Soviet dreams they are much hampered by the lack of it. For example, I pointed out that the the present level of Soviet inter library loan requests from Boston Spa of about a 1000 a year was at least 50 times too low, which drew the response, "hard currency"; while only 20% of their journals arrive within a fortnight, the rest take at least 2 months. Perhaps the Soviet bomber could take care of that. But clearly there are joint co-operative ventures that could take place. For example, one suggestion eagerly received was an exchange arrangement between a Soviet information technologist and one from the West - all local expenses paid on each side. There is no doubt that such a scheme could be of mutual benefit: the Soviets don't know much about our information chain while we are completely in the dark about the way their information industry operates. In fact under glasnost many Soviet data bases are seeing the light of day that even the Soviets didn't know about.

Another possibility discussed was the setting up of a seminar in Moscow on "Acquiring Information from the West", in March or April 1991. Several firms have already shown interest as well as the British Council. Having met the latter in their Moscow "lair" I have only admiration for the daunting task now facing them: over 6 million

square miles to cover; an educated population of 270 million; and a time of eagerness for new knowledge and new ideas. We could send a 100 information specialists to the Soviet Union and it wouldn't be enough; but unfortunately the British Council doesn't have any. On the other hand the British Council could play a crucial role in facilitating commercially sponsored visits.

Did I say "lair"? Distant outpost would be more descriptive. To 'phone from Moscow to London now takes up to 36 hours and some of the letters I am now sending back may take over 8 weeks to arrive. Communication is a major problem. And more contact with the West will put even greater

pressure on existing resources. SBOBS here we come.

In this short article I have, of course, only reported part of my impressions, but I am available to discuss further details either by phone, 091 2844250, via fax 091 2611182, or Telex 53564 UNINEW G with interested UKSG members. But if you are interested in the Soviet scene then my advice is to move sooner than later.

Finally I would like to thank the British Council for paying my air fare, and ICSTI and the Estonian Academy of Sciences for expenses in Moscow and Tallinn. □
