

Books shed light on fast changes in Russia

Like almost everybody, I've spent a great deal of time lately watching television. Frankly, I have been concerned that, if I dare to look away, some new, earth-changing event will occur and I will have missed seeing it at the very moment it took place.

It's gotten to the point that if I happen to wake up in the middle of the night, I immediately start groping for the TV switch. Who knows what new country may have been formed as I slept, what longstanding ideology declared null and void, what leader ousted, what visible or invisible walls sent tumbling down?

I wish I knew more about the Soviet Union. Toward this end, I plan to go there some time, and not just to visit Moscow and Leningrad, but also to see places like Taganrog, the birthplace of Chekov or Yasnaya Polyana, where Tolstoy was born.

IN THE meantime, here's a sampling of recent fiction and non-fiction that can provide a closer look at that vast, mysterious place and its people:

• "The Turn: From the Cold War to a New Era: The United States and the Soviet Union, 1963-1990" by Don Oberdorfer (Poseidon).

Washington Post correspondent Oberdorfer was present at all the USA-USSR summit meetings during

the last decade, covering the events and interviewing the participants. His up-close observations and conclusions go to make up this hefty volume. Gorbachev receives high marks as does former Secretary of State George Shultz.

• "Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy" by Dmitri Volkogonov, edited and translated by Harold Shukman (Grove/Wendland).

Perhaps one of the most noteworthy aspects of this no-holds-barred biography of Stalin is that it comes from a Soviet source. Volkogonov is a historian and a deputy in Russia's parliament. Also noteworthy: Volkogonov's father was a casualty of one of Stalin's many purges.

• "The Irony Tower: Soviet Artists in a Time of Glasnost" by Andrew Solomon (Knopf).

This focuses on avant garde artists from enclaves in Moscow and Leningrad who, a decade ago, were forbidden to exhibit their works in public. Solomon is a British journalist who covered Sotheby's historic auction of their paintings in Moscow in 1988.

• "The New Russians" by Hendrick Smith (Avon-paperback).

Comprehensive study of the Soviet Union today, even as it changes.

• "The New Soviet Journalism: The Best of the Soviet Weekly Ogonyok" edited by Vitaly Korotich,



book break Victoria Diaz

translated by Cathy Porter (Beacon-paperback).

Ogonyok, a progressive Soviet journal, published these 32 articles in 1988 and 1989. The pieces explore such matters as the chronic Soviet food shortages, anti-Semitism in Leningrad, organized crime in the Soviet Union, contraception and abortion in Moscow. Photos complement the collection. Korotich edits Ogonyok.

• "Gorbachev: Heretic in the Kremlin" by Dasko Doder and Louise Branson (Penguin-paperback).

Thought-provoking commentary on perestroika, glasnost and the Gorbachev era, written by two world-class journalists wise in the ways of the Kremlin.

• "Every Hunter Wants to Know: A Leningrad Life" by Mikhail Iosad (Norton).

A collection of 10 short stories, many of which are set in Iosad's na-

tive Leningrad (he now lives in the United States). A taste of pre-and-post-glasnost.

• "Catalyst" by Philip Cornford (Bantam).

Explosive thriller by Austrian journalist Cornford features KGB and CIA operatives, and the fictional Vigilantes for Peace, who apparently aim to stop at nothing in order to attain their goal of total nuclear disarmament. Not surprisingly, the

Politburo Central Committee also figures in.

• "Asya" by Michael Ignatieff (Knopf).

Extravagant first novel by this BBC television journalist is filled with romance, tragedy, intrigue. Aristocrat Asya Goltzine is a volunteer nurse during the Revolution who falls in love with an artillery officer who mysteriously disappears. Is he traitor or hero? Asya makes it her life's work to prove that he is the latter. Some shades of "Dr. Zhivago."

• "Rostnikov's Vacation" by Stuart M. Kaminsky (Scrappers).

In this whodunit, the good guy, Inspector Porfiriy Rostnikov, goes after the bad guys in the KGB, MVD and GRU, who appear to be

planning the assassination of Gorbachev. In the meantime, Rostnikov is ordered to take a vacation and, while at Yalta, becomes involved in tracking down the killer of a fellow investigator. This is the seventh in a series that includes the 1988 Edgar winner, "A Cold Red Sunrise."

• "The Americans Are Coming!" by Alex Beam (St. Martin's).

In this zany novel, American forces occupy the Soviet Union (Arnold Schwarzenegger is president of the U.S.; Gorbachev has retired to Moscow); foisting such problems as free elections, wrinkle cream and hamburger-vending machines on the recalcitrant Soviets. Food for thought amid all the futuristic craziness.

LAST WORDS: The 1991/92 season of Borders Book Shop Visiting Writers Series, sponsored in conjunction with the University of Michigan, will begin at 4 p.m. Tuesday, Sept. 17. Nicholas Delbanco will read from a work-in-progress in the Rackham Amphitheatre, Ann Arbor. Delbanco, author of 15 books, directs the Hopwood Awards Program and the MFA Program in Writing at the University of Michigan. For further details on the event, call 764-6298.

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