

by Julie Dorf and Masha Gessen

On July 22, 1991, a Czech Air plane carrying sixty-four American queers landed in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg). We were on our way to the International Gay and Lesbian Symposium and Film Festival in the Soviet Union. It was absurd. It was exhilarating. It was mostly our fault.

A year earlier, two Moscow lesbians asked Julie, an American who has traveled to the USSR frequently, to help attract foreigners to a lesbian

conference in Moscow the following December. Ever the pragmatist, Julie suggested they schedule it for a warmer month and network with some gay male activists who had talked about a film festival. As far as anyone could tell, the idea was then shelved, the way dreams are in this land of grand ideas and bleak reality.

But a few months later, when Roman Kalinin (a founder, with Jim Toevs and Julie, of the International Gay and Lesbian

Human Rights Commission) was touring the United States, the idea reared its head again, this time as a definite plan. By the end of his tour, the event had acquired dates and an advertising tag line: "TURN RED SQUARES INTO PINK TRIANGLES." Meanwhile, Gorbachev was preparing decrees that would outlaw public demonstrations.

Masha decided to get involved when she met Roman in New York, figuring that she would never forgive herself for not getting involved if the conference did come off—which, she thought, it wouldn't.

If it did, we knew it would be earth-shattering. Julie had tried a number of ways of disseminating information about gays and lesbians in the USSR, but none elicited the level of commitment required from the other activists to help their fledgling movement. Only activists who had spent time in the Soviet Union seemed to develop an affinity bordering on obsession that we had come to call "catching the bug."

In the manipulative tradition of good organizing, Julie concluded that if a large number of Americans spent time in Russia with lesbians and gay men, they would not only catch the bug, but would infect others upon returning to the States. She visualized a ripple effect that would make it possible for Soviet activists to receive the material aid and information they sorely needed.

Masha acquired the bug either through an unfortunate accident of birth or thanks to the Fates, depending on her mood. "My name is Masha Gessen. I am imprisoned in Los Angeles, where I just moved from New York; I grew up in Moscow, so I had no choice but to work on this conference," was how she introduced herself at the orientation session in Prague prior to our arrival in Leningrad.

Organizing a group trip meant that we—the Commission, with two full-time staff living on unemployment, half a dozen volunteers, and a program budget of less than \$10,000—had to make all of the arrangements, from visas to airplane and train tickets, inside and outside the USSR. (Our group was 60 percent what travel agents called "deviants"—people whose itineraries require special arrangements). To complicate matters further, together with our Soviet partners we had decided to make all arrangements independently of the government. This piecemeal approach was undeniably superior to the familiar Soviet monolith: it allowed us an unusual level of independence from the government and resulted in better, more reliable accommodations.

The delegation was to spend five days in (as most of the activists we worked with called Leningrad at this point) St. Petersburg and four in Moscow. In St. Petersburg (where we chose to begin because of the city's relatively liberal government and modest press presence), Olga Lipovskaya, a leading (heterosexual) Russian feminist, helped with the logistics, since no one on the organizing committee had any conference-organizing experience. Olga and her boyfriend pulled strings for everything from hotel reservations to meals, buses, and security.

Since the ultimate success or failure of our trip rode on communication, we decided to cut no corners in translation. We paid the interpreters in dollars, making them the only paid conference staff. (The two of us, our two tour managers, Rich Schimpf and Alan Robinson, and Russ Gage and Jim Toevs, who managed much of the financial matters and logistics, received free accommodations and a 100-rouble—or about \$3—per diem.) On the first day of the conference we were greeted by our team of ten cream-of-the-crop interpreters. They may have been the best in the country, but the thought of one of them attempting to translate Robin Tyler's comedy routine or Harry Hay's Radical Faerie discourse filled our hearts with dread.



Compiled by Kate Krauss

Number of men jailed per year in the USSR for being gay: 700 ● Percentage jump of HIV-positive people in the

St. Petersburg

Red-eyed from six hours of successive meetings with the organizing committees of both cities, we arrived a few hours before the opening plenary. We ran around the so-called palace of culture we had rented setting up the registration table, finding technicians to set up microphones, pinning up NAMES Project quilt panels, and briefing the security team of men who looked like Russia's Twelve Most Wanted. Their job on the first day was to guard the entrance through which, the Soviet organizers were convinced, thousands of people were going to start pushing at any minute. We, on the other hand, were expecting only a few of the couple of hundred people who had received invitations—practically the sole means of publicizing the St. Petersburg leg of the conference—to saunter in at some point during the day. Deep in our hearts, we knew we would be giving a conference and no one would come. We were wrong.

In the space of a few minutes, about half an hour before the scheduled beginning of the opening plenary, pandemonium struck in the previously deserted lobby. Blue invitation cards (the Soviet organizers had requested hard-to-find colored stock for all conference documents to circumvent counterfeiters) flashed in the crowd: All 200 must have shown up. A woman insistently yanked on

Masha's sleeve. She was a reporter from *Moscow News*, perhaps the largest independent newspaper in the country, published in both Russian and English. Like all press, she had not been invited. She explained that she had returned from a trip the day before and overheard a clerk at the PanAm counter (mind you, we flew Czech Air) talking about a delegation of gay and lesbian Americans. From this point, it was a simple matter of tracking us down—something many other reporters, including Soviet television stations, also managed to accomplish.

The St. Petersburg organizers had made it clear for months that they viewed any potential publicity as a threat to their work and safety. They feared gay-bashers and provocateurs, as well as "undesirable" gay people—prostitutes and black-marketeers—whose presence might discredit the conference. Their fears went double for the press.

A crowd of people who had been barred from entry because they had no invitations accumulated in front of the building fairly quickly. Local friends of foreign delegates arrived and were also turned away. On one occasion, we had to ask a Soviet television crew that had snuck into the building to leave, knowing full well that we were forfeiting a chance to influence their coverage. We had made a commitment to respect our Soviet partners and to remember that no mat-

ter how painful the moment, we had no right to second-guess their decisions: as Soviets frequently remind Americans, we always leave, and they always stay.

Encounters with people whose sense of gay pride seemed to have been nurtured in complete isolation (people from all three Baltic then-republics, Byelorussia, the Ural Mountains, and remote areas of Siberia) would amaze us throughout our visit. A painfully shy middle-aged female librarian from the Urals gave an interview to one of the American journalists. The journalist asked her if she knew any other lesbians or had ever had a relationship. Her answer was a quiet "no." The journalist asked if she thought there was anything wrong with being a lesbian. This time her "no" was outraged, accompanied by a look that could shame even a reporter.

We had worried about the workshops. Organized along four tracks—"AIDS and Health," "Education," "Arts and Culture" and "Politics and Activism"—they were the product of Masha's sleep-deprived mind, aided by random and painfully general notes from conversations with Soviet gay and lesbian activists. As program coordinator, she had drafted the schedule, which we then faxed to the Moscow and St. Petersburg organizing committees. St. Petersburg responded with some names of suggested Soviet presenters

"Soviet Stonewall," July 31, 1991: US and Soviet activists stage a demonstration in front of Moscow's Bolshoi Theater to protest Article 121 of the Russian penal code (which outlaws gay sex).

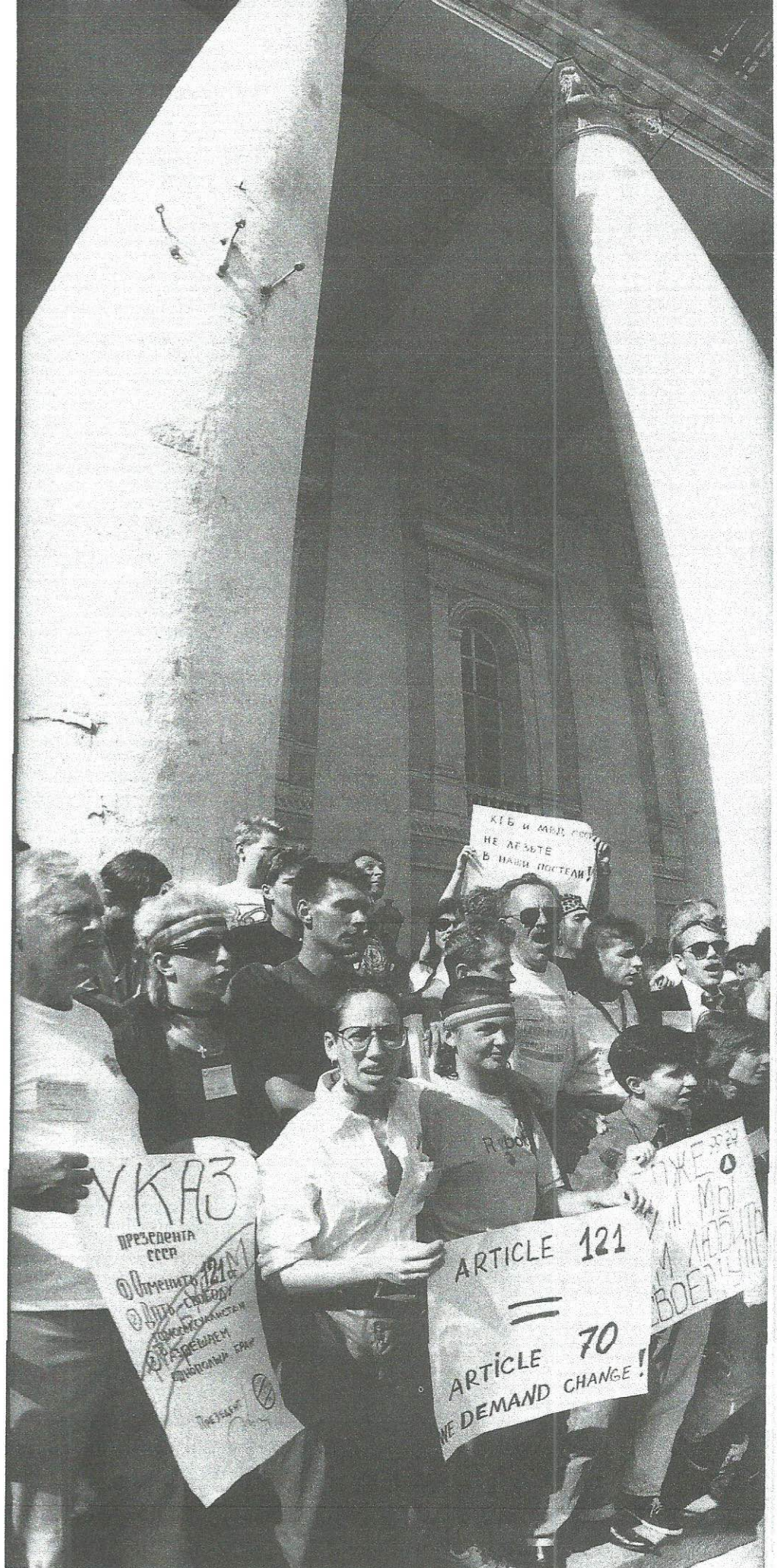
but no changes to the substance of the program; Moscow simply acknowledged receipt.

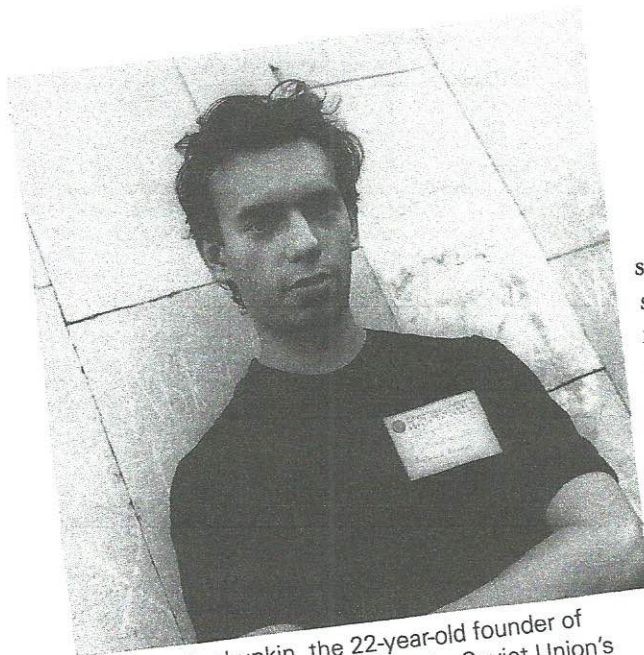
The response created a conundrum typical in dealing with the Soviet Union: while we were conscientiously avoiding even the appearance of importing Western culture (having deftly chosen a bicultural and bilingual program coordinator), our Soviet partners extended a hungry invitation to import as much of that culture as possible. The path we ultimately chose was to urge the American delegates, who had already set the agenda, to approach the workshops not as lessons in North American queerdom but as forums for exchange of information and ideas. We didn't need to be quite so worried—the Soviets kept us in check.

At the end of the "Gay and Lesbian Identity" workshop on the first day, after the American participants used up the allotted 90 minutes in presentations, the Soviet participants said, "OK, we have listened to you, now you listen to us." An hour later, the group broke up reluctantly, and only after it became clear that we would have to cancel a plenary session if people did not interrupt their socializing to join the audience.

Although it sometimes interfered with our stated agenda of holding a conference, we felt that socializing was in many ways our biggest accomplishment. The price of our success was a logistical

Photos by Marc Geller





Gennady Roshupkin, the 22-year-old founder of the Moscow AIDS Project, and the Soviet Union's most visible person with AIDS.

nightmare. The drivers of our hired buses refused to drive back to the hotel with three people to a seat and an aisle full of passengers; so many Russians came back to the hotel for dinner that we had to get additional tables in an adjacent dining room; the number of requests for the pricey single rooms exceeded room availability; and the dozen Russian speakers in the delegation found themselves working for hours at a time (the interpreters didn't work dinners).

The interpreters found themselves in other challenging situations. Alex Kon, a middle-aged heterosexual intellectual whose pedantic British English made him one of our best interpreters, was assigned to the poetry reading. But having to translate poetry into both English and Russian was only a small part of his challenge. A member of the American delegation brought a poem during the reading of which he

stripped—an outstanding occurrence in a country where shorts have become marginally acceptable only in the last five years. Alex not only translated the poem without skipping a beat, but participated in the finale by marching out of the room

arm in arm with the naked author.

A lot of things came full circle in our five days in St. Petersburg. Toward the end of a session on gay and lesbian visibility, a very young Russian lesbian stood up and addressed some of the Americans. "I am sick of talking about how we have to show heterosexuals that we are just as normal as they are," she declared.

"We just are. If they can't take it, they can go to hell." We are queer, we are in St. Petersburg—get used to it!

But along with such liberated outbursts, we had the sobering experience of visiting a St. Petersburg prison where we talked with men imprisoned under Article 121 of the Russian

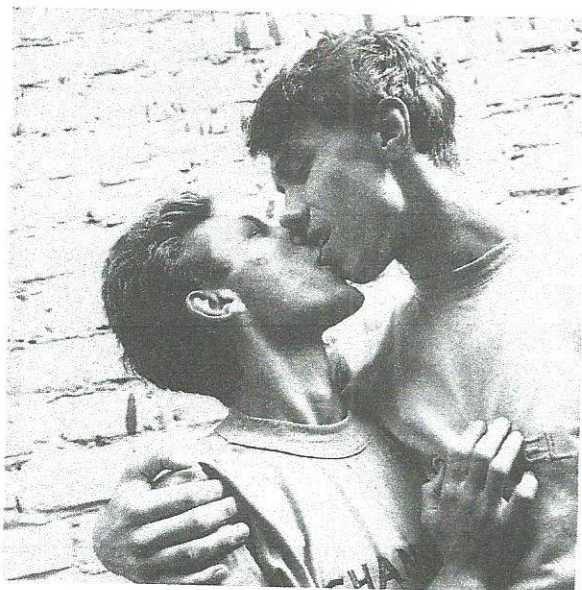
penal code, which outlaws male homosexual contact. We visited the "degraded" ward, where the prisoners calmly told us of the kinds of humiliation they have long learned to accept, and added almost apologetically that they didn't think we could do much to help.

Moscow

From the day we had arrived in St. Petersburg and begun negotiating with the Moscow organizers who met us there, it slowly and painfully sank in that there was a problem with holding a conference in Moscow: the Moscow organizers didn't want one. They—meaning, primarily, Roman, who brought back from his US trip a decidedly un-Soviet appreciation for the mass media—believed strongly that grand-scale visibility

Asya Savinova, left, and Yelena Khakimova founded Siberian Initiatives—a coalition of Siberian lesbian and gay groups—at the 1991 Symposium.





Alexei Starosyenko, left, and Veniamin Vol'nov, are activists from Barnaul. They began working together after Veniamin came out in an article in a Siberian youth newspaper.

and not small-scale skill building was the ultimate goal of our presence. The number of lesbians and gay men who could attend the working sessions, and even the 20,000 people who bought tickets to the film festival, were miniscule compared to the number of people we could reach through well-orchestrated public demonstrations and the resulting media coverage.

Soviet press coverage exceeded all expectations. The formerly staid Communist Party newspapers featured front-page photographs of men kissing; the most popular Russian television news program devoted one evening's most colorful segment to the conference; even the Russian Orthodox newspapers took note, in their own reactionary way.

We spent hours with the

local organizers trying to decide what type of demonstration to have and where to have it. Red Square was out of the question for them. It was "too serious"—meaning too dangerous: few Soviets would show up. We decided on the area in front of the

Bolshoi Theater, historically a gay cruising spot. The arguments about the best place to hold the demo, the best time, the best slogans, and the best speakers felt like routine direct action—never mind that the Russian-language discussion was accompanied by Crimean champagne and a mysterious mushroom dish we were fed every evening.

Save for the logistical difficulties of rallying in two languages (Masha had to translate for all the speakers, since our interpreters did not work in front of the cameras),

the demonstration itself felt mundane, as demonstrations go. We stood on the cracking but grand theater steps and chanted to the curious (and sometimes confused) crowd: "We are not afraid!" "Fight AIDS!" "Repeal Article 121!" We had all but forgotten that this demonstration was an unprecedented action when Roman, who had begun a speech, handed the megaphone back to Masha for the translation and choked, "I can't speak anymore." An internationally known gay activist, he had never participated in a gay demonstration in his native language or in his own country. And only two years earlier he had been writing under a pseudonym.

Roman wasn't the only person holding back (or, increasingly, not holding back) tears that day. "Now I



Ksenia Sokolovskaia and Mila Ugolkova—two of the three founders of the Moscow Organization of Lesbians in Literature and the Arts.

remember what I am fighting for," said a cynical Washington fundraiser. "Sometimes I forget."

Sometimes we all forget, and it takes the sight of hundreds of people risking their careers, families, and freedom for contact with other gay people to renew our appreciation for the freedom we take for granted.

Epilogue

We had not even begun to tire of regaling our US friends with stories of what had been dubbed the "Soviet Stonewall" when the news of a right-wing coup d'état interrupted our happy, activist chatter and threw us into a panic. Desperately worried about our Soviet colleagues

and friends, who had been so visible just a couple of weeks earlier, we burned up the phone lines. Members of the US delegation stayed glued to the television screen and repeatedly caught glimpses of familiar faces.

As it turned out, the gay involvement in the resistance to the coup was not limited to the barricades in front of the Russian Parliament building, where Russian President Boris Yeltsin weathered the siege. Roman and several other people used computer equipment we brought, and trained them on, to reproduce Yeltsin's decrees, thousands of copies of which were passed through the crowds and pasted on walls throughout the city, a small TEMA (a Moscow gay publication)

stamp on each one.

Roman and other Russian activists are reluctant to say what role the conference experience played in motivating gays to risk their lives by joining the resistance. And as Russian lesbian and gay activists struggle to make their voices heard during the most tumultuous period of change since 1917, we may never be able to gauge how much nine days of unprecedented gay and lesbian visibility in the summer of 1991 contributed to shaping the history of the Russian gay community. But in our hearts, we know that there were two Russian revolutions in August of 1991, and we can only hope that the ultimate result of both will be freedom. ♦

The demonstration at the Bolshoi: US and Soviet activists stage a kiss-in in front of a curious and sometimes confused crowd. Here, the authors finesse their way into Moscow headlines.

