

In the first of three columns to mark the centenary of the 1917 Bolshevik coup d'etat in Russia, **Vitali Vitaliev** looks back at some of his close encounters with dreaded Soviet technologies.

After All

by Vitali Vitaliev



Vitali Vitaliev, 1967

SOVIET TECH

'Let's take up guns, children, and join the snipers!'



Jolly Pictures magazine for under-sixes could have been renamed 'Jingoistic Pictures'

IT WASN'T my idea in the first place. As far as I can remember, it was suggested by our one-eyed history teacher, nicknamed (rather cruelly) Cyclops.

It was November 1967, and the teaching staff of my Soviet secondary school were trying to come up with the best way to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the 'Great October Socialist Revolution' of 1917. It was decided that the students would write a 'letter to the future', to the year 2017, which would then be immortalised in the wall of our school's red-draped assembly hall, with a note 'to be opened on the 7th of November 2017, the day of the 100th anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution'.

At this point, a reader may ask: how come the 'October revolution' happened in November? Without delving into the intricacies of the Julian – as opposed to the Gregorian – calendar, I can just say that in the Soviet Union most things were not what they were called.

Indeed, the 1917 turmoil in Petrograd as a result of which Bolsheviks usurped power was

actually not a revolution, but some local fracas with far-reaching consequences – definitely not 'great' and, most certainly, not quite 'socialist'. With all this in mind, the fact that the October 'revolution' actually took place in November appears insignificant.

But I've digressed... The legitimate objection to the Cyclops' idea was that the letter, even if written on the best available paper, was bound to be rendered unreadable after 50 years of storage. At that point, our physics teacher, nicknamed (again, rather cruelly) 'Ishak' ('Donkey'), suggested that we should engineer an air-tight capsule in our school laboratory, pump the air out of it and, having created a near-vacuum, make it ideal for preserving the letter in a perfectly readable state for 50 years, or longer.

And that was done. The capsule with the 'letter to the future', glorifying "our dear Comrade Brezhnev" and "our happy Soviet childhood" (I didn't take part in the writing, I swear) was embedded in the wall, inside the niche covered with a

crematorium-style metallic plate saying: "To be opened on the 7th of November, 2017."

I sincerely hope that Ishak's engineering solution has failed, and when (and if) the shamefully bombastic letter finally gets opened in a couple of months, it will be thoroughly unreadable.

2017 has been a peculiar year so far. While still in hospital, recovering after open-heart surgery, I started getting invitations to give talks to different UK audiences on what life was like in the USSR. I did accept some, for it is important for the people in the West to know the truth about the now-defunct totalitarian country where I had lived for 35 years.

It is only fair, therefore, to share some of my Soviet impressions with the faithful 'After All' readers, to whom I am extremely grateful for dozens of 'get well soon' emails during my illness. To mark the anniversary, in this and the subsequent two columns, I'll be offering my own personal and not-too-serious take on the Soviet technology, science and engineering that I had been able to observe at close hand over a number of years.

The above-described 'letter to the future' in its 'near-vacuum' capsule, was not my first encounter with Soviet technology in action. The very first one probably happened even before I was born, for at the time of my birth both my parents – mum, a chemical engineer, dad, a particle physicist – had been working at a secret factory making atomic and hydrogen bombs in the Moscow region. The levels of radiation at the factory and in the near-by 'secret town' where we lived were sky-high, and I must have been exposed to it while still in the womb – a fact that, in the opinion of my cardiologist, could partially explain my subsequent heart problems.

Or it could have happened later, in the kindergarten, where we all had to learn by heart (another reason for my persisting cardio issues?) the 'Let's Take Up New Guns, Children' doggerel by Vladimir Mayakovsky: "Let's take up new guns, stick red flags to their barrels, and with cheerful songs,

let's all join snipers' ranks!"

The issue of the *Jolly Pictures* magazine for children of six and under(!) that featured the poem, also carried a number of not-too-jolly pictures of guns, with red flags attached to their bayonets, as well as those of the heroic Soviet warships and missiles (see photograph).

Or it could have occurred on the day when my father solemnly dragged into our one-room communal flat, a first-generation Soviet TV set – a massive plastic crate, with a match-box-size screen that could only be watched through a special magnifying lens. I will never forget how a blurred woman's face appeared on it and said (in Russian): "Good evening, Comrades!", to which I as a polite five-year-old duly replied (also in Russian): "Good evening, Comrade!". I was wondering how the lady, tiny as she was, got inside the mysterious plastic box. The TV's make was 'KVN', which some Soviet hits (those who were not behind bars yet) deciphered as '*kupil, vkluchil – ne rabotayet*' – 'bought, switched on, doesn't work'.

As for my very last Soviet technology exposure (not to count the solitary Moscow-Hook of Holland train carriage in which my family and I defected from the USSR in January 1990), it happened during my last KGB interrogation in Moscow. The agent who spoke with me placed a bulky shoe-box-shaped parcel, wrapped in a newspaper, next to him on the table the moment he entered the room. One didn't have to be a particle physicist's son to see that it was a tape recorder. During our conversation, the crudely camouflaged device was malfunctioning, and my KGB interlocutor would have to slap it casually with his palm.

Yes, the much dreaded in the West Soviet 'technology of terror' that had accompanied my life in the USSR for over 35 years, had not always been terrifying for one simple reason: more often than not, it simply did not work! *

Vitali Vitaliev is shortlisted for the 2017 PPA UK Columnist of the Year Award for his 'After All' column.