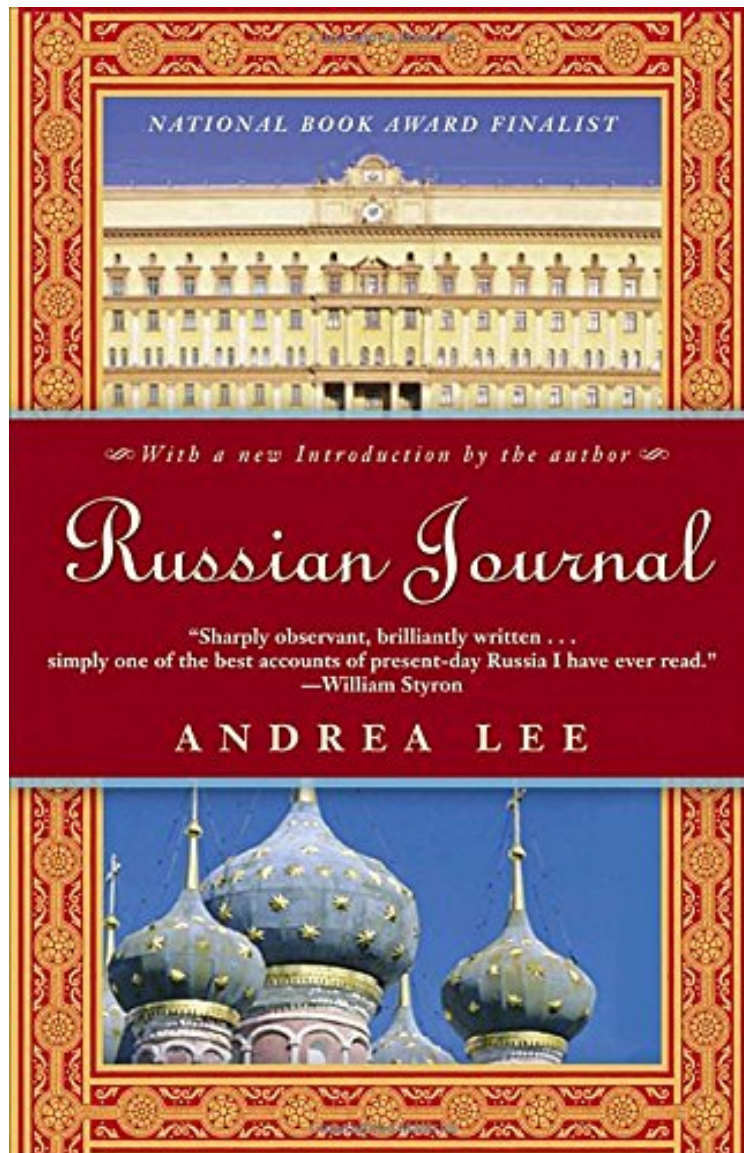


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Russian Journal

Andrea Lee

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Andrea Lee : Russian Journal before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Russian Journal:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Interesting Journal of Intesting PeopleBy UrennaDuring 1978—1979, twenty-five-year olds, Andrea Lee, a grad student at Harvard in English and her husband, Tom, sponsored by a government exchange of scholars, was a Harvard doctorate candidate in Russian history. He had studied the language, spoke near-native Russian, and spent time in Russia prior to having his wife as his companion.

They resided at Moscow University for 10 months, and then Leningrad State University for the remaining two. Gifted with an ear for languages, Lee quickly picked up the total stock of words in Russian. She journalized their entire stay. They spent eight months, living on campus, in a small, two room apartment, which was considered a luxury. Apartments that housed Soviet students had four to six people in two rooms. A radio, placed in each students' apartment, had one station, Moscow Radio, which could not be turned off. Lee described Grigorii, their neighbor, a journalism student, stalwart in his beliefs concerning his country. However, he appeared fascinated with Donna Summers, and continually played her song, "Love to Love You Baby," much to the annoyance of Soviet students. Later, Lee and Tom discovered Grigorii's job was to befriend and report on foreign students. In the journal, she changed the names of their Russian friends and acquaintances. Lee wrote of their attraction and loathing for our Western lifestyle. Those attracted loved Wrangler jeans, which were popular in the seventies. The black market avidly sold men and women's Western apparel, perfumes, makeup, and music. The ones loyal and committed to their party thought themselves physically and spiritually stronger than the West. Lee wrote that in the West, grew up in a world of advertisements, jingles, billboards, etc. In Russia, there were no competing brands to advertise their wares; there was only one brand, the State brand. Yet Lee believed living in simplistic surroundings made her 'inner life more intense.' She and her husband were more attentive to beauty. . . . "a more austere environment seems to favor sensitivity." Having no comforts or luxuries, in a disciplined society, Lee believed she saw things with more clarity. At a public bathing facility, she saw Russian women as sturdily built or bulging grotesquely. Yet they revealed a compelling appeal to Lee because they were unpretentious and unself-conscious of their bodies. Lee aptly wrote about friends and acquaintances physical appearances. I admired her ability that from their faces, she recorded or discerned what she believed were their inner feelings and conflicting emotions. An issue that caused anxiety was losing their residence. A valuable commodity was owning an apartment, and there was an extensive waiting list. If you fell out of favor with the Party, you could lose your apartment and cause trouble for your parents. Poet, Rima, Lee's best friend, lived with her parents, ex-husband, and seven-year-old daughter. Her fiancé, Vasia, was a nineteen-year-old poet and drifter, whom she often spent the night with. With tight restrictions on housing in Moscow, it was impossible to move out, even if you didn't like your ex. Rima couldn't afford to be emotional. Before leaving Russia, Lee and Rima secretly taught English to Russian Jews about to emigrate to America. One of her students told Lee that a man's success in Russia depended on who you are or whom you know. To get anywhere, you have to be a Party member. Lee liked that in America, she could converse without censoring her thoughts, and could wander freely without passport or identification. Maybe this is minor to some, but where she and Tom had been, it was delightful and, while in Poland, en route home to America, they became giddy and excited. "...we felt released from a subtle deadly confinement, which, we only now realized, had sapped our spirits for months." There are many stories in Lee's journal that are book worthy. I like her writing style in her journal. It's both serious and playful. Her thoughts and feelings on her one year experience there is easily perceived. This is the third book I've read by Lee, a former Philadelphian, who now resides in Italy.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Well written
By Eclectic Reader "Sal" This is a well written journal from many years ago. I'm heading to Moscow and Saint Petersburg and hope to be able to use what I've learned to navigate the different culture that Russia presents.

4 of 5 people found the following review helpful.
Memories of a Soviet Moscow
By alldayReader Andrea Lee's Russian Journal contains essays about the ten months she lived in the Soviet Union in the late 1970s. It is a prosaic memoir of the telling details that made up life under the Soviet System, the cramped housing and long lines for goods and food, the black market for jeans and anything western, the dual lives of Soviet citizens, the private life hidden from outside (KGB) surveillance versus the public responsibility of compulsory meetings and work assignments and mouthing of Soviet allegiance while decrying the decadence of the West. Jimmy Carter was President, the Soviet Union was preparing for the Olympics the United States would end up boycotting, and the idea of a crumbling Soviet system symbolized by the fallen Berlin Wall was really inconceivable, no matter what people say now, in retrospect. What is most interesting about this memoir are Lee's many conversations with Russians who were convinced (no matter how western-crazed they were) that America and its way of life -- decadent, materialistic, lacking patriotism and spirituality -- would inevitably fail and that the Soviet System would triumph. They were wrong about the Soviet System. But given where the United States is right now, after decades of materialism gone wild and capitalism gone rampant, they may have been right in their predictions about us.

"A subtly crafted reflection of both the bleak and golden shadings of Russian life . . . Its tones belong more to the realm of poetry than journalism." –The New York Times Book Review

At age twenty-five, Andrea Lee joined her husband, a Harvard doctoral candidate in Russian history, for his eight months' study at Moscow State University and an additional two months in Leningrad. Published to enormous critical acclaim in 1981, *Russian Journal* is the award-winning author's penetrating, vivid account of her everyday life as an expatriate in Soviet culture, chronicling her fascinating exchanges with journalists, diplomats, and her Soviet contemporaries. The winner of the Jean Stein Award from the National Academy of Arts and Letters—and the book that launched Lee's career as a writer—*Russian Journal* is a beautiful and clear-eyed travel-writing classic. "[Lee] takes us wherever she is, conveying a feeling of place and

atmosphere that is the mark of real talent.”—The Washington Post Book World “A book of very great charm . . . [Lee] records what she saw and heard with unassuming delicacy and exactness.”—Newsweek

About the Author Andrea Lee was born in Philadelphia and received her bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Harvard University. She is a former staff writer for *The New Yorker*, and her fiction and nonfiction writing has also appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* and *The New York Times Book*. She is the author of *Russian Journal*, the novel *Sarah Phillips*, and the short story collection *Interesting Women*. She lives with her husband and two children in Turin, Italy. Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

Chapter 1 Arrival AUGUST 3 The tower in which we will live for most of the next ten months is one of the landmarks of Moscow, an absurd thirty-two-story wedding cake of gray and red granite, set above the city in the Lenin Hills. This titanic building, the main dormitory of Moscow State University, is a monument of the pompous and energetic style of architecture nicknamed “Stalin Gothic.” Seen from a distance, it suggests a Disney version of a ziggurat; its central spire, like the Kremlin towers, holds a blinking red star. Inside, as in a medieval fortress, there is everything necessary to sustain life in case of siege: bakeries, a dairy store, a fruit and vegetable store, a pharmacy, a post office, magazine kiosks, a watch-repair stand—all this in addition to classrooms, and student rooms, and cafeterias. On the outside, it bristles with a daft excess of decoration that is a strange twentieth-century mixture of Babylonian, Corinthian, and Slavic: there are outsized bronze flags and statues, faience curlicues, wrought-iron sconces—even a vast reflecting pool decorated with metal water lilies the size of small cabbages. As I climb the endless stairs and negotiate the labyrinth of fusty-smelling hallways, I feel dwarfed and apprehensive, a human being lost in a palace scaled for giants. I came to this odd new home with my husband on a summer evening two days ago, when exhaustion from long-distance travel gave every new sight the mysterious simplicity and resonance of a dream. I had my first glimpse of the Soviet Union as we broke through a cloud barrier near Sheremetyevo Airport, and found ourselves flying low over a forest of birch and evergreen, dotted with countless small ponds. There was an almost magical lushness and secrecy about this flattish northern landscape that I found powerfully attractive; suddenly I remembered that my earliest visions of Russia were of an infinite forest, dark as any forest that stretches through a child’s imagination, and peopled by swan maidens, hunter princes, fabulous bears, and witches who lived in huts set on chicken legs. Tied to Russia by no claims of blood or tradition, I still felt, while very young, an obscure attraction to this country that I knew only from its violent, highly colored folklore; its music, through which ran a similar vein of extravagance; and the dark political comments of adults. It seemed to me to be a mysterious counterweight to the known world of America—a country, like the land at the back of the north wind, in which life ran backward and the fantastic was commonplace. Our disembarkment and passage through customs at Sheremetyevo were standard chaos, involving a long, dazed wait in a crowded room traversed from time to time by hot breezes smelling sweetly of cut grass. Only one memory remains with me from those hours: the sight of a Pioneer* excursion group of twenty small girls who seemed, by their Asiatic faces and straight black hair, to be Siberian. They all wore the blue shorts, white shirts, and red neckerchiefs that I had seen in pictures, as well as ornately curled hair bows that gave them a queer geisha look, and as I studied them with the dreamy precision of fatigue, all twenty stared back at me with an avid, unadorned curiosity. Standing beyond the customs barrier was a young man who introduced himself in English as Grigorii, a journalism student sent to meet us by the university’s office of foreign affairs. Grigorii was a dark-haired young man in his twenties, with very small eyes behind enormous round glasses and a pinched, rather gnomish body in a large, baggy suit; the impression he gave was that he had melted down slightly inside his clothing. He led us outside to a black Volga, a Soviet car that looks like a cross between a Rambler and a Plymouth. A short-legged driver, wearing a checked cap pulled down very far over his ears, stowed our bags, and soon we were speeding down a road with the vaguely horrifying sense of freedom one feels only when going through absolutely strange territory in a strange car. It was dark by now, and the smell of fields and forest rushed in through the windows. Grigorii had discovered that we both spoke Russian, and had grown garrulous. “So you are a student of Russian history?” he was saying to Tom. “I myself am extremely interested in American history—especially in your Civil War. Two years ago I even wrote a paper on the Great Barbecue.” “The what?” asked Tom. “The Great Barbecue—the turning point of the Reconstruction period. Don’t tell me you haven’t heard of it!” (Grigorii pronounced the word “barbecue” with the gleeful relish of a Frenchman saying “Marlboro.”) “I haven’t,” said Tom, and as the car slid through the darkness, Grigorii illuminated for us this lost part of American history, mentioning feudal remnants, the industrial bourgeoisie, and the struggle of the working class. Listening to his small, dry, pedantic voice mention names and places I’d never heard of, I wondered what Marxist looking-glass we’d stepped through. Where on earth were we? Was he talking about the same America we had just left? When the monstrous silhouette of the university tower appeared on the skyline, Grigorii paused to point it out proudly. “Impressive, isn’t it?” he said. “It’s the most luxurious dormitory in the Soviet Union—every year hundreds of tourists come to visit it. It’s a city block in circumference; some other time I will give you the figures on its height and number of windows. I’m sorry that we won’t be passing the reflecting pool tonight, but there is a very handsome giant barometer that I will show you. I feel very lucky to live there. We’ll be neighbors, so to speak!” “Hurrah!” I whispered to Tom, and he dug his elbow into my ribs. Then we sat silently as the black tower grew larger against the sky. Our arrival meant passing through a

gatehouse, climbing a great many stairs, crossing a chilly marble hall, and threading through a maze of corridors on a path that led at last to a long ride in an elevator, and some kind of fuss with an old woman over a key. Although it was only about nine o'clock in the evening, a charmed stillness seemed to reign in the dormitory; we saw very few students. Instead, there seemed to be inordinate numbers of babushki—old women—in semi-official posts, knitting and nodding in dark corners like watchful beldames out of a Grimms tale. The babushka of the keys, a tiny creature with a fierce squint under a cowled white shawl, watched us struggle with the door to our room and then turned to whisper portentously to a still smaller companion, Ischo Amerikantsy—More Americans. When Grigorii left us, we flicked a switch, and in the sudden bright light, faced our living quarters for the year. They were what Russians call a blok—a minute suite consisting of two rooms about six feet by ten feet each, a tiny entryway, and a pair of cubicles containing, between them, a toilet, a shower and washstand, and several large, indolent cockroaches. The two main rooms were painted the dispiriting beige and green of institutional rooms around the world, and furnished, rather nicely, with varnished chairs, tables, bookcases, and two single beds. (I've since discovered that our rooms represent great luxury, since Russian students in the same building often live four and six to such quarters.) Each room held a radio that tuned in to only one station—Radio Moscow—and at this particular moment, news was being broadcast by a woman with an excited, throaty voice. "Today," she said, "the Party Government delegation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, led by Comrades Le Duan and Pham Van Dong visited the Kirovsky factory in Leningrad . . . In front of the monument to V. I. Lenin in Factory Square, there took place a meeting of Soviet-Vietnamese friendship . . . The Leningraders arrived at the meeting with flowers, red flags, and signs in honor of the unbreakable friendship . . . The people gathering together greeted the emissaries of the heroic Vietnamese people with warm applause . . ." The news went off, and on came a medley of Komsomol songs delivered stalwartly by what sounded like an entire nation of ruddy-cheeked young patriots. "You can't turn this thing off," said Tom, fiddling with the radio knob. Indeed, like one of Orwell's telescreens, our official radios could be turned down to inaudible, but never turned off. I began to giggle hysterically, and to calm myself, walked over to the window, from which I could see, illuminated by a spotlight on one of the pediments of the building, a gigantic bronze flag. A bit later, in one of the fits of witless energy that sometimes replace exhaustion, we decided to take the metro into Red Square. Everyone describes the Moscow subway system, so I won't, except to say that it is as clean and efficient as they write, and that it is awesome, for an American, to see the veins of a city lined with marble, gilt, and mosaic instead of filth and graffiti. It was in the subway that night that I first endured the unblinking stare of the Russian populace, a stare already described to me by Tom and by friends who had been in the Soviet Union before. "You will never not be stared at," they told me, advising me to stare back coolly and steadily, especially at the shoes of my tormentors, since the average Soviet shoe is an embarrassment of cracked imitation leather. When we got on at the University metro stop, the scant group of passengers included two minute, humpbacked babushki; a pretty fresh-faced girl of eighteen or nineteen, who opened her mouth to yawn and revealed two aluminum teeth; a fat young mother in a minidress and platform shoes, who held a baby tightly swaddled in a ribbon-bound blanket; a group of stylish young men dressed in greasy American jeans and vinyl snap-front jackets. They all looked us up and down with undisguised fascination and whispered comments to their neighbors. Although we were dressed in what we thought was a neutral, inconspicuous fashion, the clothes we had on—cotton pants and shirts—now seemed infinitely newer, crisper, better cut than anything anyone else had on; my sandals, also, seemed to fascinate everyone. So we sat, practically riddled with stares, in the dim light of the rocking subway car, breathing an atmosphere heavy with odors of sharp tobacco, sausage, and perspiring human flesh. Tom drew a deep, happy breath. "It still smells like Russia," he said. We got off at the Lenin Library stop, and walked up the street to Red Square. My first view of that expanse of architectural marvels—the rolling redbrick walls of the Kremlin, with the angular mass of Lenin's tomb directly beneath them; the Victorian birdcage that is GUM, Moscow's largest department store; and, at the far end, St. Basil's, the preposterous, sublime fantasy in cartoon color and buoyant plaster—made me reflect a bit enviously that whatever deficiencies there may have been in freedom and economic well-being throughout Russian and Soviet history, the people have always had compelling symbols. I have often found in myself a surprising, childish hunger for patriotic pageantry. How easy it would be, I thought, to summon up a blind surge of chauvinism if one could draw upon this vision—the sacred enclosure of Red Square, where Lenin lies preserved like a Pharaoh. Except, perhaps, for the Statue of Liberty against the steep rise of lower Manhattan, there is no emblematic scene in America with comparable drama. Facing the Kremlin, I realized for the first time how unfailingly chaste and low-key are America's national icons; it is at once our weakness and our great strength to be bad at symbols. Our emblems seem designed for the measured response of rationality, while Russian monuments—like the Stalinist monstrosity where I am to live—evoke raw emotion. It was a warm, humid night, and small groups of Soviet and foreign tourists were roaming the square. When we stopped to see the goose-stepping soldiers change the guard in front of Lenin's tomb, we found that we were standing in the midst of a group of men from Soviet Uzbekistan. Brown-faced, wearing embroidered skullcaps and long quilted coats, they stared in mild amazement at this spectacle that must have seemed as alien to them as it did to us. Behind us, babushki in black dresses and shawls were sweeping up cigarette butts from the cobblestones. Later we walked over to have a glass of gaserevenaya vada, carbonated water flavored with fruit syrup, from one of the dispensers that apparently take the

place of drinking fountains in Moscow. For two kopecks, a glass is filled with the fizzy drink; one swallows it, and then replaces the glass, to be washed by a cold spray of water for the next drinker's use. (Hearing the amount of coughing around me even in August made me decide already that I wouldn't make a habit of this.) We didn't have the two kopecks for the machine, so we asked a passer-by, a tall, mournful-looking man wearing creased dark pants and a bright nylon shirt. He gave us a whole handful of change, and refused our ruble. "You're Americans, aren't you?" he asked us in a low voice, tugging glumly at the ends of a dandyish mustache. "Then keep the ruble. I can't do anything with it. It's not money. They tell me it's money, but look in our stores and tell me what I can buy with it. Nothing!" He spat on the ground and vanished up the street. We took the metro back to the University stop, then walked up toward the dormitory along an avenue lined with apple trees. We passed through the tiny gatehouse in which the old woman who was supposed to check our identification was sleeping, her face a puckered mass of wrinkles, her feet resting on a rag rug where an equally ancient dog slumbered. In the courtyard was a clump of trees, and from this small grove came strains of guitar music and laughter. A girl's voice sang snatches of "Makhno," the poignant song from the Russian Civil War that I had heard once back in America; in her thin, tipsy soprano, however, the song sounded merry rather than sad, the voice of any student when there are still some drinks left and some time left in the evening and in the summer. Outside the grove, in the stone courtyard itself, a teenage boy and girl were chasing each other around and around, in and out of the light of the big iron lamps. They were clearly Russian, but both were dressed in jeans. When the boy neared the girl, he would try to grab her, but she dodged him each time with a shriek of laughter, her long braid streaming behind her. Their voices and footsteps echoed, faint but definite, against the walls of that monstrous folly of a building, as if they were lightheartedly defying a hostile authority. Watching them, I felt disarmed and curiously moved; I realized as well that nothing this year would be predictable or easy to fathom. In a few minutes we were climbing the steps to our own small space, and our first night in the tower.