

Sunday, June 1st

It's hard to believe I've been in Russia just over a week. It feels like a lot longer, but I guess we also do not have much time left. Today several of us took a boat ride to Peterhof, Peter the Great's summer palace. We've been so lucky to have such great, sunny weather, which I hear is not too common in St. Petersburg. We toured the palace as well as the upper and lower gardens, all of which were beautiful. It's hard to believe how much gold there was and how big the estate was, especially since the palace was largely redone after being occupied by the Nazis. The palace's magnificence really was comparable to Versailles, which it was partly based off of. I was surprised by how obsessed Peter was with his maritime theme and desire to make Russia's navy the greatest in the world. It was also strange to think that I was in Russia instead of visiting the palace in another European city. I guess that is part of Russia's charm though: it is completely unpredictable, which makes it so fascinating.

Yesterday I went shopping at one of the malls to look for something warm since our classroom is always freezing. Most of the stores were Russian based, but I still got a kick out of seeing "Accessorize," "Calvin Klein", "Guess," and a few other stores I recognized. I found it interesting that the store with the most customers by far was a place called "The New Yorker," which played Jay-Z, Kanye West, and other American artists. It definitely seems like the younger generation has embraced capitalism and wants the same things that are common to Westerners. When I was checking out (it was a struggle to figure out what the cashier was asking me for; eventually, I realized she needed my passport to verify the name on the credit card), the girl in line behind me was fascinated that I had an American passport, and I caught her looking in my large handbag to try and figure out what types of things an American keeps in her handbag. The cashier, however, seemed less than amused at our language barrier. I really feel like I can relate now to foreigners in the US trying to learn another language. Prior to this, I had gone to the Nevsky Prospekt area to partake in the city's 306th birthday festivities (it was founded in 1703). It was strange to see so many smiling, clearly happy Russians, since they are usually expressionless or look unhappy (though looks can be deceiving--all of the Russians I spoke with were very friendly and excited to meet Americans). We learned from our lecturer that Russians find smiling foolish unless there is something especially spectacular that they are smiling about. If someone is smiling, they always ask why, since it is only done on rare occasions. Otherwise, they are made fun of for "smiling like an American." My roommate was

made fun of by two middle-aged Russian women who I overheard point at her feet and laugh hysterically about the “Amerikanka” for wearing flip-flops. It was fun to see so many Russians take pride in their city and act happy for once. It was common to see groups of people dancing in big circles in the middle of the street, as well as a host of stage performances (stages were set up all over the roads). There were also a ton of bands, floats, and an amazing number of military and security personnel (which is something that has surprised me in general about the city--I wonder if it is just because we are in a large city with a large naval training ground, or if Russia in general has an extremely high percentage of its population employed in the military). I also saw the militia (police) randomly stop a young man and ask for his papers. I read in the St. Petersburg Times newspaper that many organizations are outraged at the number of men stopped and hostels targeted, as the police search for potential draft dodgers during the conscription season. One of the guys from the Arizona program was stopped, but he said it was no big deal. I must admit though, I feel much safer in St. Petersburg than I thought that I would. I’m still paranoid everywhere I go that I’m going to be pick pocketed, especially because one of the Duke girls had her purse stolen from right next to her at a fast food place, and one of the Sewanee guys was already pick pocketed on the metro (a crowded one, and he noticed just as the guy hopped off the train). Nevertheless, perhaps due to the incredibly awesome amount of time it stays bright out, I feel pretty safe walking around everywhere, even just going to the grocery store/mall/museum/etc. by myself. I had also heard that minorities were a target, but I often walk with Najla and she has even mentioned she doesn’t feel discriminated against here, even though she was really worried because she is one of the only people who wears a headscarf and has darker skin. On our way back from the city’s birthday celebration, we were yelled at by a man who was probably in his 60s. He was shouting something about capitalism (my roommate’s flip-flops gave away that we were American) and shook his fist at us. I’m guessing instances like this will become increasingly rare since the younger generation appears much more pro-West than their elders.

Saturday June 6th

Today we took the bus to Pushkin, the town named after Alexander Pushkin (poet) because he lived there for many years while he attended school. Pushkin is the site of Catherine the Great’s summer palace. The palace was completely looted and mostly destroyed by the Nazis

during WWII (The Great Patriotic War to Russians--different start date from WWII since the war did not begin for the Soviets until Germany invaded the USSR). It is amazing how badly it was destroyed--it was still being restored while we were there! Most of the façade was being reconstructed, and the impressive amber room (made of amber panels), was only restored in 2003. The palace was absolutely gorgeous inside, but I wish the outside was a bright blue with shiny gold like I had seen in picture. Instead, it was very dull and it needed to be repaired. The drive there was nice because we got to see what towns and fields in Russia are like: not much different from Illinois, except there seemed to be a lot more industry.

After class earlier this week, I went to St. Isaac's Cathedral. First I climbed to the top of it like I did at St. Paul's in London and Notre Dame in Paris, and the view from St. Isaac's also did not disappoint. After climbing, I went inside the cathedral, which was way prettier than I could have imagined--Russia continues to impress me in that way. It's hard to believe the church served as an anti-religion museum during communism. The church also had a large cabbage patch growing in front of it during the Leningrad blockade to try to alleviate starvation. It is amazing how much shelling the building survived during WWII, another characteristic of the building that reminded me of St. Paul's. Next, I walked around the grounds near the Admiralty, and then went inside the Church on the Spilled Blood. It was pretty, but not nearly as impressive as its exterior or as pretty as St. Isaac's. It was also extremely crowded, even in comparison. I was somewhat embarrassed yesterday when a lady who was clearly American (speaking very loud English, overweight, pushy, and demanding) was stereotypically making her way to the cashier at the souvenir area, and loudly and exasperatedly yelled, "Excuse me!" in English to everyone in her way, and acted indignant that not everyone understood or immediately obeyed her "polite" command. I felt embarrassed that someone like her (assumes everyone speaks English, thinks everyone should speak English, and takes a me-first, 'I'm very rich and thus more important than everyone else' attitude) represented Americans, especially since there were so few others I encountered to restore our image. She made absolutely no effort to communicate anything in Russian, not even a hello to the clerk she barked at. It really made me appreciate my experiences and opportunities abroad, so that my classmates and I will hopefully never be as ignorant and inconsiderate as that woman. Being abroad has not only helped me define what I love so much about America, but it has also helped me understand and appreciate all cultures. For example, at the palace today, our tour guide Margarita reminded me a lot of myself and my

Russian ancestry. More importantly, her tour explaining how much the Russians suffered against the Nazis made me truly admire and respect such a strong people that could suffer the loss of 27 million people during a single war, and still have the resolve to finish and win the fight. On Thursday, a group of us went to the Hermitage, where the rooms were even more impressive than the paintings they held (and the paintings were world-famous!). Also, today we went to a Chinese place close to the Chaika (our dorm), which was really delicious. It was nice to have tasty vegetarian food for once, since Russian food is not vegetarian friendly and rarely spicy.

Monday June 8th

Today after class I went to the local market. It was neat to see how “real” Russians live. First I went to the clothing market and bought a huge, warm fleece for 350 rubles since I was not prepared for how cold it would be here. I have a feeling Russians negotiate prices more, but seeing how poor the people at the market looked I didn’t want to exploit their already cheap prices. The market was exciting because there were a lot of people and I felt like I was truly experiencing everyday life in Russia. This outdoor market with tents for stalls provided a stark contrast to the tourist oriented shops I am used to seeing on Nevsky Prospekt. Adjacent to it was an indoor food market. There was every type of meat/fish you could imagine just hanging from above (not the most pleasant smell), and the floors were soaked. It was really exciting going to the clothing market and having Russians ask me tons of questions about the prices of clothing I was looking at and if all the clothing on the table was the same price. It was fun being able to communicate with them.

Yesterday I spent a couple of hours at the internet café. It was good to be able to semi-catch-up with people, and mostly to look at NYTimes.com and get a basic idea of what is happening in the world right now. It’s strange going from reading the newspaper front to back every day, to never seeing a major English language newspaper. Part of it is nice to forget and finally be able to do a little bit of book reading instead, but mostly I miss it. On Sunday, Najla and I went to the Russian State Museum. I love going to museums here because not only are the artifacts inside them fantastic, but many of them are located in former palaces, which are absolutely beautiful. I had never heard of any of the artists, but I want to learn more about them because so many of the paintings were gorgeous and fascinating. I took pictures of my favorite paintings and the artists’ names so I can learn more about them later.

I have consistently been really surprised and impressed at the quality of service I receive in stores and restaurants (much better than in London) and how much the younger generation especially seems to want to be part of the Western world. Most of all, I am surprised at the number of beautiful buildings and the European architecture. I had kind of thought of Russia as a vast, industrial wasteland before, but this trip has opened my eyes to how beautiful the country is. While the end of Vasilevsky Island I live on is lacking these features, St. Petersburg and its surrounding suburbs have so many more sites, palaces, and gardens than I could have possibly imagined. Also, being here has inspired me to read Russian literature and become more familiar with the culture in general (esp. art). I started reading a bit of Nikolai Gogol's novel *Dead Souls*. Some of the participants were talking about how they took a course on Dostoevsky and that the museum dedicated to him is just awesome, so I really want to go there (to his apartment/museum) and read *The Brothers Karamazov*. If only there was time for everything!

Wednesday June 10th

Today Najla and I had an adventure all over town as we tried to find museums about the Siege of Leningrad. As usual, it was raining when we left Smolny (though for once it wasn't cold and windy). We first tried to go to the St. Petersburg History Museum, a riverside mansion with an exhibition on the Siege. We got off at the Vasilevsky metro stop, which brought us to a cute, lively neighborhood which is apparently where most of St. Petersburg State University is located. It was fun to explore and see other parts of town. When we arrived at the museum, it said that it was closed on Wednesdays, even though my guidebook which was published in 2008 said that it was only open Tuesday through Thursday. This has been one thing about the city that really frustrates me. The day before, we tried to go to the Arctic museum on a day the guide book said it was open, only to discover it was closed. (I was using Frommer's, which you would think is reliable.) Almost every museum I have gone to, the guidebook has been wrong about either the days or the hours open. Planning becomes very difficult, given that we get out of class late and it takes so long to get anywhere that there is no time for error, especially since most places close by 4 or 5 at the latest. After finding this museum, we tried to go to the other museum dedicated to the Siege of Leningrad, but Najla was really hungry so we stopped to eat at a café on a side street near Nevsky. The place smelled amazing and all of the pastries looked delicious. They even had a vegetarian sandwich with lots of peppers, which is rare in Russia (the

vegetarian aspect and the peppers/spicy aspect). After quickly eating, we tried to make it to the next museum before it stopped selling tickets, which we assumed would be 4pm since it supposedly closed at 5pm. It's by the Summer Gardens, further back from Nevsky than the Church on the Spilled Blood. In my quest to take a shortcut, however, we got lost, and ended up back on Nevsky eventually, but close to Mayakovskaya metro station. By this time, it was almost 5pm and we were really far from the museum, so we gave up and went home. I wish it hadn't been raining throughout the entire course of our journey, but it was still neat to see parts of the city that we hadn't before.

Sunday June 14th

Friday was a lot of fun and I felt like I accomplished a lot. Friday was Russia Day, a national holiday celebrating Russia's official separation from the USSR, so we didn't have any classes. Najla and I got up early to go to the Leningrad exhibit at the St. Petersburg History Museum we had walked by a couple of days before. Everything was written in Russian only, but it was still really cool, especially since I was able to grasp main concepts. It made me so happy that I am learning Russian, because I would love to know everything those exhibits said. Russia has such a rich history, it is easy to see why someone would take a lot of pride in being Russian. Even if Russia isn't the most powerful country in the world, I can see why its people could never be as proud to be citizens of another country as they are proud to be Russian. The city and its residents can really take any obstacle thrown at them, and handle the challenge better than a citizen of any other country in the world (besides America of course ;). The will and perseverance prevalent in Russian culture is absolutely incredible. To see pictures of the cabbage patches outside of St. Isaac's Cathedral, the skeletal figures of residents during the blockade, the bomb shelters they built--it was clear the Russians would never consider surrendering without a hard-fought fight, and they would fight with incredible determination. It's so hard to imagine having my city occupied by a foreign power. It's also incredible to me that an event with such powerful effects on Russian society has gone largely unnoticed by the American public. Even though I consider myself a fairly educated person on events of WWII, especially with respect to the USSR, I had no idea how intense and powerful the Siege was, and I can't wait to learn more about it. I definitely want to go back to the museum someday when I am hopefully fluent in Russian so I can fully absorb everything the large exhibit had to offer--I could easily spend all

day in that exhibit. Still, I was glad my Russian was good enough to at least get more out of it than the average American/English speaker. After the museum, we decided to take advantage of the gorgeous day and walk along the river. At one point, we passed a guy barbecuing, and I really missed the days when I wasn't a vegetarian and loved a great summer party with burgers on the grill. It was so nice out and the city is so much more pleasant when it is sunny and warm. We walked through the peaceful summer gardens and saw the eternal flame. Afterwards, we ate dinner at a Georgian restaurant. Unfortunately it cannot currently sell any Georgian wine (which they are famous for), due to the war there in August 2008. My meal was very dry and not spicy at all like I heard Georgian food was supposed to be, but at least the restaurant was pretty and not everybody can go to a Georgian restaurant in Russia!

On Saturday Najla and I spent the day at the Peter and Paul Fortress before heading to a concert in Palace Square, followed by dinner at an Indian restaurant where Putin has dined. The cathedral at Peter and Paul is beautiful, and contains the remains of many famous tsars. The prison there was not nearly as interesting or terrifying as I would've expected of a Russian political prison. Unfortunately, the museum about the city's history and the space museum were both randomly closed even though they were scheduled to be opened. Learning to adapt and happily go with the flow is something I've grown accustomed to here. Eventually we went to the concert in Palace Square. There were a few performances in the beginning, followed by three pop stars (we stayed for the first two). It was an older crowd and the two pop stars we saw were probably around 60 and 50 years old, but they were still really fun and great entertainers with a lot of enthusiasm and energy. I'm really impressed by how elaborate the city's free festivals are. It started off with what I'm guessing was the national anthem sung by a soldier, and he sang really well. While he sang, a couple of people dressed as cosmonauts went up really high in the sky via "rocket" (there were sparks/flames coming out of the crane lifting them up). During this, images of famous Russians were shown on the screen, and it was easy to feel pride in Russia during this event, which is what Russia Day should be about. On Sunday we went to the Eugene Onegin opera. I forgot to mention that on Saturday we went on a really cool canal tour of St. Petersburg. It was a beautiful day for once--we couldn't have asked for better weather--and we went all over the city and on the big part of the Neva too. The city really is so pretty, and especially when it's sunny. Earlier today we went to the Philharmonic which I enjoyed,

especially since I used to play the violin. The building is typically immaculate, and the orchestra is amazingly talented.

Monday June 22nd

On Thursday we went to Lenin's office, which is right next to Smolny and currently is the St. Petersburg city hall building. The tour isn't open to the public in general, including Russian students, so it was pretty cool to see. Apparently Lenin and his followers during the revolution just kind of marched in and power was handed over relatively peacefully, which I found surprising given Russia's violent history. On Friday I went to the Museum of Political History (after trying to go to the Aurora for the third time and finding it randomly closed even though it was scheduled to be open each time I went). The Political History museum is definitely my favorite museum so far. It focuses on history starting with Tsar Nicholas II--basically only Soviet history (which is my favorite)--and it was fascinating. They had a portrait of Nicholas II from the Winter Palace with bayonet slashes through it from when the palace was stormed, the video camera Gorbachev used to address the people, a lot of suits and hats that leaders wore (including one President Ford gave), the clock used to tell time for the canon shot signaling the storming of the Winter Palace, and various other really interesting artifacts. There were also a lot of videos from the Soviet era, including ones about Cuba and Khrushchev's visit to the U.S. This era is so fascinating that I can't wait until I'm fluent and can read more original documents from the time. On Saturday Najla and I went to the Arctic and Antarctic museum. I was hoping there would be more information on oil, but it was still worth going to.

At night we tried to go see the Scarlet Sails. The city is spectacular at night, so it was fun to see it all lit up (since we are normally far from the center when this happens), but then as usual here there was a torrential downpour that left us soaked. We were completely soaked even though we had umbrellas (We NEVER left the dorm without them!), and it became really cold and windy. We stood out there for a couple of hours but hadn't seen anything and were freezing, so at midnight we left. Of course, ten minutes later on our way to the metro, we heard tons of fireworks go off, and the metro had JUST closed when we got there. Luckily we were able to find a bus quickly that took us to Primorskaya, and then the four of us just walked home from there. We were SO freezing that the night was kind of a bummer. Oh well--if a night has to be like that, at least I get to spend it in Russia and have a deeper appreciation for what bad weather

really means. Sunday we got up early to take the 8am bus to Novgorod. The city was founded in 862 (? I think), and is considered to be a major center of Russian culture. It was interesting to see such an old Kremlin and also to see life outside of one of the two major cities. We had lunch right away at this fantastic restaurant (Deitnets?) that served us with cool traditional Russian silverware and plates. The meal only got better as it progressed, and included this vegetable soup in an interestingly shaped bowl with a large (hard to use but very pretty and ornate) spoon. This afternoon I went to the park again and read for a bit since it was so nice out. We went to the Philharmonic again, and all of the music from tonight's performance was composed during the Siege of Leningrad, with the exception of the song of the city, which is apparently only rarely played. We were instructed to stand up for the city's song. People definitely have a lot of pride in being from St. Petersburg, which makes sense considering all it's been through.

Tuesday June 23rd

Today we went to the Leningrad Memorial Cemetery, where over half of the one million victims (mostly of starvation) of the Siege are buried. It was pretty powerful (how large it was), and sad that it was all mass graves. Its vastness and number of memorials somewhat reminded me of Normandy, though Normandy was more powerful to me personally (and larger). It's amazing how much destruction the Germans inflicted not so long ago.

Saturday June 27th

Tonight we are taking an overnight train to Moscow. I'm REALLY excited to go to Moscow. There is way more Soviet history there and more politically-oriented stuff. Plus, our living space is supposed to be nicer and the academics are supposed to be more intense. I'm kind of sad to be leaving St. Petersburg since it's been my home for the past five weeks, as much as I despise the Chaika ;). I guess it just shows how easy it is to adapt to different living situations/conditions. I can't believe my Russia trip is halfway over already. This is definitely an unforgettable experience.

Monday June 29th

Yesterday morning I arrived in Moscow. Moscow is an amazing city and I'm so excited to be here. I could totally see myself living here. When we arrived we stopped briefly at the dorm

to drop off our bags. I was surprised at how nice our dorm is, especially considering what it looks like from the outside. The MGU campus is beautiful: very countryside feel and pretty. I was very impressed with how organized and on top of it the GRINT center is. I think I'll learn a lot here. Our room is nice but the only drawback is that there is only one desk; we have the smallest room. There is fast internet and a mini fridge in our room though, so that's pretty nice. We have a gorgeous view of the forest. We get off at the very last metro stop on the outskirts of Moscow, so we get to see both the touristy/city aspects as well as how more typical Russians live further from the hustle and bustle of this city. I really love Moscow and would love living here for a long time. It's so EXCITING. And I love having access to the news and information (via internet), especially since so many important world events are decided here. Yesterday shortly after we arrived we went on a bus tour of the city. I wish I knew more about Russian history because it is so fascinating. The bus tour was three hours but seemed much shorter--probably because the city is huge and there is so much to see and do. St. Petersburg always felt very touristy and as if the whole city revolved around the tourism industry and not much else. It reminded me of colonial Williamsburg in that sense because the town thrived on promotions of its history and had a fake, recreated feel to it (and a lot of it was reconstructed since so much of the city was destroyed by Nazis during the Siege). Moscow, on the other hand, feels like a very "real" functioning city with thriving commerce, sense of purpose, politics, and everything you would expect to find in a big international city (poverty too--though I noticed this less here than I do in Chicago, cool sites, beautiful parks, museums, theaters, etc.). Moscow just feels so important and so much more dynamic/fascinating, whereas St. Petersburg felt more stuck recreating its past. It's hard to describe the difference but I just really love Moscow. St. Petersburg was great and had pretty architecture and palaces, but the precipitation and coldness gets old quickly, and I just really like Moscow so far.

Today after testing, my roommate and I went to Red Square, which is truly spectacular. Words cannot adequately describe how beautiful, big, and breathtaking it is, especially St. Basil's Cathedral. We went inside St. Basil's and it was pretty cool. The gold on the icons certainly did not disappoint, though I was surprised at how small it was inside. I can't believe they were able to build something so grand and resilient in the late 1500s. Next we went to GUM, where everything is designer and you pass by window displays with fur coats literally over \$10,000. I've never seen such an expensive mall in my life, even in Las Vegas. It was very

pretty, especially the outside of it. Next we went to the State Historical Museum (we had a very productive day!), which was AWESOME. The whole time I couldn't help but say how pleasantly shocked I was by its awesomeness--I had no idea it would be so cool. We saw a carriage that Tsar Nicholas (I forget if it was I or II) rode in, a huge gold photo album, a lot of coats/uniforms the tsars wore, and lots of other cool stuff, dating back thousands of years. The next day we walked all along Tverskaya Street. We saw Pushkin's statue, then walked by one of Stalin's skyscrapers, then behind it to see the U.S. Embassy (ugly), then saw the outside of the Russian White House, and finally walked by the State Duma, before heading to Red Square to meet up with some people from the St. Petersburg program that were just doing a short trip in Moscow for a final group dinner. Side note: I forgot to mention that during our walk we also passed by Patriarch's Ponds, which is mentioned in Mikhail Bulgakov's book *The Master and Margarita*. It was sad to see everyone go because we had such a fun group.

Thursday July 9th

Tuesday was President Obama's last full day in town, so Amy [my roommate] and I made it our goal to find him. Before that, however, we went to the Pushkin Fine Arts Museum. We went to the 19th-20th century European Art building/exhibit which contained mostly impressionism (my favorite), and had a lot of works by Monet, which I loved since I studied him before in French class. As soon as you exit the museum you spot the big, beautiful, modern, new, and expensive church that was built on top of a former popular public swimming pool. Amy and I kept seeing a million motorcades, so we decided to follow those. I knew Obama was staying at the Ritz-Carlton across from Red Square, but didn't know which building that was, so we decided to look for the nicest-looking hotel in the Red Square vicinity. We came across a big group of reporters and squeezed in between them, since we figured they were waiting for Obama. We met some girl a little older than us who said she would love to practice her English with us, since she never gets a chance to speak it with natives, and that she had never met Americans before. We asked her a few questions about politics, but she said that like most young people, she doesn't follow it and has no interest in it. She did, however, volunteer that she and most others prefer Putin over Medvedev because Putin has done a lot for the country and Medvedev hasn't accomplished anything yet. She said she wants to be a translator, that learning English is easy, and then asked us a lot of questions about America. Eventually, a very

impressive bilingual official came to the reporters we were standing among and gave an interview about what Obama said. All of the reporters cleared out though after the interview, so it was pretty clear Obama wasn't coming anytime soon. Amy and I stuck around a little bit but then decided to go home. Obama's visit to Moscow was incredibly different from what I remember about his visit to London last summer. In Moscow, we were able to get up close with the reporters, literally less than a foot away from the bar separating us from the highlighted speaker, who emerged from a building where Obama had recently spoken and there was a possibility where he might have emerged into the street. In London, on the other hand, Obama walked just two steps from deep inside the gates at the Houses of Parliament to his car, where nobody would have a chance to get anywhere close to him, and only see him from far away for a brief second, and there were thousands and thousands of people there holding American flags and chanting pro-Obama sayings.

Friday July 10th

On Wednesday I went to the Cosmonaut Museum inside VDNKh Park. It was beyond impressive. The rocket aluminum monument on top of the museum is incredibly stunning in height. The grounds are massive and I can't wait to go back. The museum had two dogs (stuffed) that were the first to go into space, and tons of satellites, rockets, spaceships, spacesuits, moon rocks, and a mini Soviet flag presented by President Nixon that U.S. astronauts had taken up during their Apollo-11 mission. It really is impressive how the Soviets could suffer so many losses during WWII and still recover enough economically and intellectually to beat America into space with both Sputnik and Yuri Gagarin's flight in *Vostok*. I couldn't believe pictures of how tall the rockets were. Afterwards I found a bench in VDNKh and read for awhile. On Thursday I went to the Revolution Museum/ State Museum of Contemporary Russian History. That was pretty cool. There was a lot of detailed information in every room about different eras in modern Russian history. I was surprised at how violent Russian history is. The Revolution must have been a scary time to live through, especially during the overthrow of Tsar Nicholas II and the struggle for power following Lenin's death. It was really sad to see a portrait of the tsar's whole family, seeing how young most of his kids were, that was taken within a year of their execution. There was such an incredible number and variety of weapons. I found the stuff on WWII to be especially interesting--all the photos of actual battles, etc., and German flags. It was

cool to see the stuff about people secretly being religious during Stalin's rule. But I was especially impressed with the role of propaganda: the exhibit explained that in order to bring about the necessary economic boost following WWII, every person in society needed to be mobilized to full capacity, and the only way to do this was to get society to rally behind a cause. The posters continue to impress me. I wonder if propaganda is considered as important today as it was then. They had some other cool artifacts too, like a podium Yeltsin spoke at, a table Gorbachev sat at, and a hilarious poster from the World Peace Council (>90% funded by the KGB) titled *The World According to Ronald Reagan*. They also had the Russian Constitution which was pretty cool. A lot of people seem to think that Russia suppresses all dissent, probably because the American media portrays it that way, but the museum even had pictures of poor, hungry people protesting their conditions during the transition from Communism.

After the museum I found a bench near Pushkinskaya Square and read while all of the Russians on benches around me drank--never mind the law forbidding drinking in public, though I'm guessing arbitrary enforcement occurs. I was surprised to see a mini-protest occurring in the square; officers stood and watched but didn't break it up. Today I went with a couple of people to the Central Museum of Armed Forces. It took us forever to find it, but some really nice guy saw us looking at a map next to the bus stop, could see that we were lost foreigners, and (successfully) tried to help us out. So we eventually got there with an hour left, but I could easily have spent all day there. It is definitely my favorite museum in Russia so far. We only covered the second floor, but it was amazing. They had part of an ICBM that took up the entire floor, and it was only a tiny fraction of its full size. The museum had F. Gary Power's U-2 spy plane, where I was surprised to see so much of the plane intact. They also had his goggles, rubles, and a note to civilians written in about 10 languages saying that if they helped him, his government would reward them. I was surprised that the museum already had stuff from the wars in Chechnya and Georgia up. I really wished that I was fluent in Russian so that I could read the Russian perspective on them. I also wished I could've read the stuff they had on the Russian war in Afghanistan. It was weird to see them glorifying the pilot who shot down Powers' plane. I also really liked the artifacts the museum had on WWII, especially pictures taken in Normandy right after D-Day and the Soviet flag flown over the German Reichstag on May 1, 1945, as well as a huge statue-like thing that hung over the entrance to the Reichstag that had a huge Nazi symbol, as well as lots of little things like Stalin's jacket and pistols.

Sunday July 12th

Yesterday we had an excursion to the Kremlin, including its churches. The complex is really large, pretty, and peaceful, with a big pretty garden. The churches were gorgeous both inside and outside, and the sun was shining and the gold on the domes was bright. I'm really looking forward to seeing the outdoor gardens and taking advantage of the beautiful Moscow summer weather. After the Kremlin tour, Amy and I saw the changing of the guard along the Kremlin wall where the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier (WWII) is at. Next we ate at a ridiculously expensive fast-food style place near Red Square where I learned my lesson to never buy anything by the gram. Today I slept in, which was nice, and then Amy and I went to Novodevichy Convent and Cemetery. The convent was pretty and peaceful, and felt even older than it was (which was still several hundred years old). It had a very old, countryside feel. It's strange to think such a quiet, tranquil place can be found in the middle of a city with ten million people. The headstones at the cemetery were so elaborate--I've never seen so many impressive graves. Pilots and other Soviet generals seemed to have the most impressive headstones, with large busts of themselves or plane models, etc. Boris Yeltsin definitely had the coolest and largest grave, with a huge "waving" Russian flag of marble over him. Stalin's wife had a surprisingly simple grave, with a glass case over a small white marble sculpture of her. Khrushchev's was unimpressive in comparison with a lot of other graves there. I'm now sitting in the park next door to the cemetery. I love this park.

Thursday July 16th

Today I went to Victory Park. The big triumphal arch reminded me of l' Arc de Triomphe in Paris. The flowers and fountains are really pretty and impressive too. The metro station leading to it was the most recently built metro station, I believe, and looks modern. I liked the park because it was nicely decorated but also really laid back: the fountains were filled with people jumping in them, and there were a million Coke stands. The Nike victory goddess is very tall and also impressive--like the aluminum rocket on top of the Cosmonaut museum in VDNKh park.

A couple of days ago I walked down the original Arbat street. It was definitely the most western street I've been on in Russia. There was a Starbucks, McDonalds, and lots of restaurants

with English menus. It was a very artsy street with a lot of painters. I picked up a few fun souvenirs there.

Random thought: When I ride the metro, almost everyone else is older than me, meaning they were born in Soviet times. It's hard to believe that almost all of my fellow passengers, who look so normal and nice, were once part of a system deemed the greatest threat to U.S. national security.

Monday July 20th

On Friday I went to Bolotnaya Ploschad. It was so pretty. There were more brides there than any other place I've seen in my life, which is no surprise because it's so tranquil and colorful. It's weird to think it used be a public execution site in the 15th and 16th centuries. Next I went to Gorky Park, which was kind of a disappointment. It looks really pretty from the outside, but then you go inside to discover a tacky amusement park with really bizarre stuff. An animal rights activist would have a fit. We saw a guy walking a reindeer on a leash with a different kid riding it each time he walked by. The reindeer and the man both looked like they detested their jobs. I saw bears, camels, monkeys, and all other sorts of animals on leashes. I felt very out of place there, since it was mostly little kids and their parents. It is definitely not a place to go and read in peace and quiet. On Saturday I went to Izmailovsky Park for the souvenir market. I bought three matryoshka dolls--Notre Dame, White Sox, and Michael Jackson themed. Afterwards I went to the actual park, which is huge, and has lots of trails, a river, and a pond. It is pretty and fairly isolated. The next day we went to the stadium built for the 1980 Summer Olympics the U.S. boycotted (whoever thought Americans would go inside it?!) and saw a soccer game. The crowd was much more interesting than the match. Soccer is the most popular sport in Russia, ahead of even hockey.

Tuesday July 21st

Today I had my individual lesson. It is amazing how much I am learning and improving. It is hard though to concentrate and focus on nothing but Russian for that long. After class I went to the Tretyakov Gallery (original). I wasn't expecting much, especially since I didn't know anything about Russian art and was a little tired of museums by this point. I'm so glad I went! I loved the place and couldn't believe such beautiful works of art have gone largely unnoticed by

the Western world. I had no idea that the Russians produced so much powerful, beautiful art. Why do our history textbooks only mention the French and Italians? I was especially struck by the powerful portrait of Ivan the Terrible clutching his son while his son was dying (painted by Repin), as well as all of the realist landscapes, which seem to capture how small man seems in relation to his place in the universe, as well as on earth. I also liked the picture of Peter the Great questioning someone, because I feel like I got to see a more human and less mythical side of him--seeing him not knowing all of the answers. Afterwards I went back to Bolotnaya Ploschad, where I started to read the book I bought from Tretyakov since I want to learn more about Russian art.

Friday July 24th

Only one full week left! As I write this, I am sitting in the Botanical Gardens on a bench overlooking the pond. On Wednesday we had an excursion to the circus near the University metro station, which was actually really cool. The circus is a much bigger deal here than in America, and dates back to the time of Catherine the Great, when the circus performed for her. There weren't many clown acts except for briefly in between the main acts. Instead, it was mostly impressive acrobatic feats.

Yesterday Ashley, Amy and I went to Kolomenskoe Park, which is by far my favorite park in Russia. I loved Kolomenskoe because it wasn't much of a manicured park like the ones in St. Petersburg; this was a massive, gorgeous forest where you could hike up a really tall hill and glimpse a spectacular view of the park or walk along the river. The only thing I can really compare it to is Giant's Crossing in Northern Ireland because that is the only other place I can think of along the water where you can climb to the top and enjoy such an awesome view, then hike down to the water. It was definitely one of the prettiest places I've ever been to inside a city (as opposed to a national park or parts of the countryside in Scotland and Wales).

Friday July 31st

On Wednesday we went on a canal tour of the city. It was ok, but it was raining really hard so nothing was as impressive, though even after five weeks I continue to be 'wow'ed every time I see the Kremlin and St Basil's Cathedral. On Tuesday I went to Kuskovo Estate, which is enormous and pretty. It's a heavily forested area, and I kind of felt like I was trekking through a

campground in a remote part of Wisconsin because it was quiet and full of trails for a while, and then I would hit a clearing with lots of people. On Sunday Amy and I went to Lenin's mausoleum, which was kind of eerie. It was weird to look at the body of a man who had so much influence on the course of history. It was also cool to walk along the Kremlin wall and see the headstones of Yuri Gagarin, Stalin, Brezhnev, Andropov, and other famous Soviets. Stalin had the largest quantity of flowers on his grave by far (an even number of course!).

I can't believe it's over. What an adventure it's been! I'm sitting in Red Square right now, wondering where the weeks went, loving the country, and enjoying the spectacular view of St. Basil's. I'm so lucky to be here. This trip was amazing. It opened my eyes a lot to the world. I love Russia and I'm definitely going to miss it.

Saturday August 1st

I'm in the plane! Next to me is a Russian businessman, who has been interesting to talk to thanks to his honest opinions (and I get another chance to practice Russian with a native!). I saw a picture of Mt. Elbrus in my textbook on my last day of class, which he said he went to during free time on a business trip. He said that even though he has lived in Russia his whole life, he had no idea Russia had such beautiful places, and that he's never been anywhere as beautiful in his life (and he's been all over the world!). He did mention that the region is fairly dangerous right now, and he couldn't believe how many military personnel were there. He asked if Chicago was dangerous and still like it was in the movie *Public Enemies* (or *Johnny D* as they call it there).