

AN EXPERT ON RUSSIA

BY CAROL CUMMINGS

HUGH PHILLIPS CAME TO BE AN EXPERT ON RUSSIA IN THE MOST UNLIKELY OF WAYS. A PHILOSOPHY UNDERGRADUATE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA, HE WAS POISED TO GRADUATE IN 1974. HE WANTED TO SPEND THE SUMMER BACKPACKING AROUND EUROPE WITH HIS FRIENDS, BUT HIS PARENTS REFUSED TO GIVE HIM THE MONEY FOR THE ADVENTURE. HE STUMBLED UPON A SUITABLE COMPROMISE, AS HE LEARNED ABOUT A GROUP TRIP TO THE SOVIET UNION. SINCE IT WAS ORGANIZED AND EDUCATIONAL, HIS PARENTS AGREED TO THAT. PHILLIPS SPENT A MONTH IN THE SOVIET UNION WITH THE STUDENT GROUP, AND THEN HE WAS HOOKED.

Upon his return, Dr. Phillips began to study the Russian language and earned his master's degree in European History at the University of Alabama. Then he transferred to Vanderbilt for his doctorate in Modern Russian History, where he completed his dissertation on Soviet Foreign Policy in 1985.

Dr. Phillips also had the opportunity for post-graduate study in 1982-83 at Moscow State University as a part of the Graduate Student / Young Faculty Exchange sponsored by the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX). "IREX wanted people to go over and live in the Soviet system to see first-hand

what their lives were like," he said. "At that time, the archives in the Soviet Union were closed. I actually put in a research request in September 1982, and I was finally denied the opportunity the following April." The private lives of the Soviets would be a closed book for outside research.

However, that closed book was opened less than a decade later. Dr. Phillips began his research efforts on Tver, one of the oldest cities in central Russia, in 1990. He chose Tver primarily because it had not been previously studied, and his timing was impeccable. "When the Soviet Union collapsed, the



Dr. Hugh Phillips

archives of Russian cities which had previously been sealed were opened," Dr. Phillips said. He was able to gain unrestricted access.

As Dr. Phillips pored over the archives of this city, he began to study the effects of the Russian Revolution on this one province over a twenty- to twenty-five-year period. "Using Tver's archives gave me an actual microcosm of the whole revolutionary experience," he said.

Tver is located 250 miles northwest of Moscow and is a unique and leading textile center in Russia. During the first quarter of the twentieth century, the textile workers were mostly young females who were brutally exploited and received very low wages.

As Dr. Phillips reviewed the writings within the archives, he learned that men wrote most of the memoirs, as the majority of Russian women were illiterate at that time. "By and large, the women were very poorly paid," he said. "Women made up most of the lower working class, while the men comprised the skilled workers and positions of power. Women definitely did the dirty work."

However, Dr. Phillips soon found a unique exception to this rule. He stumbled across the memoir of one twenty-two-year-old female factory worker. "There were 15,000 employees in her textile factory. At first, this woman loved her country, and she loved the Tsar, but within a year and a half she had joined a terrorist organization," he said.

Phillips attributed this marked change to the conditions endured by the workers. "They were horribly treated," he said.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, the archives of Russian cities which had previously been sealed were opened. He was able to gain unrestricted access.



Photo courtesy of Hugh Phillips

Graffiti which was unknown in Soviet times reads: "Death to the Bourgeoisie", "Russia for the Russians."

"The government immediately stifled anything that smacked of power for the individual. This period in Russian history was extremely politicized. It began the establishment of the Communist government in Russia."

A drastic change occurred in 1917, when a sudden and largely unexpected revolution ended the Romanov dynasty and the rule of the Tsar in Russia. History tells us that it was not planned, nor did any organized political group direct it. And the sleepy backwater town of Tver played a role in this historical uprising. In February 1917 Tsar Nicholas II was overthrown, and all of Russia was in celebration. All, that is, except Tver.

"At that time, the governor in the province was a German," Dr. Phillips said. "The people took over his residence and broke into his wine cellar. Then a mob, led by men but made up mostly of women, got violently drunk and lynched the governor during a two-day drunken rampage. It got so bad that revolutionary police were given the power to shoot people on the spot."

The second phase of the upheavals of 1917 was the October Revolution, in which the Soviets, increasingly controlled by Vladimir Lenin's Bolshevik Party, seized power from the provisional government. The revolution affected both the urban areas and the countryside, including textile communities such as Tver.

Following the October Revolution, the Communist party emerged as the most powerful group in Russia, and thus the Soviet Union was born. It was the world's

first Communist state, with the political organization of the country defined by the only permitted political party, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. According to Dr. Phillips, they accomplished this through the use of violence and terror that eventually led to a civil war.

Over the last thirty years Dr. Phillips' studies have allowed him to spend a total of almost three years over eleven visits in Russia. His archival research in Tver has allowed him to publish three in-depth articles on topics related to the revolutionary movement within the province. His writings give the reader a candid snapshot into what life was really like for ordinary citizens during this pivotal moment in history. As Dr. Phillips said, "You can't know what really happened in Russia without knowing what happened in these towns."



Photo courtesy of Hugh Phillips

Main Shopping district in Tver, Russia.

Phillips' scholarly interests include the Russian revolution and the Civil War, 1917-1921; Soviet foreign policy, 1917-1945; and contemporary Russian politics and international diplomacy, 1815-1945. Among his major publications are *Between the Revolution and the West: A Political Biography of Maxim M. Litvinov* (Westview Press, 1992), and articles in *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, *Slavic Review*, *Diplomatic History*, *Problems of Communism*, *Revolutionary Russia*, the *Encyclopedia of U. S. Foreign Relations* and, most recently, several articles in *The Encyclopedia of Russian History*. He also has publications in the Occasional Papers series of the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, an article on U.S.-Soviet relations, 1917-1946 and a "mini-monograph" on the Russian presidential election of 1996.

Dr. Phillips has received internal research grants from WKU as well as external grants from the International Research and Exchanges Board, the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, and the American Council of Teachers of Russian. Besides a two-semester survey of Russian history, he teaches courses on European historiography and "Terrorism in the Modern World" at WKU. One of the things he most enjoys is leading group tours (similar to the one he took in 1974). WKU students, alumni, faculty, or anyone else interested in visiting Russia as part of a group tour may contact Dr. Phillips via e-mail at <hugh.phillips@wku.edu>.



View from Hugh Phillips' apartment in Tver, Russia

Photo courtesy of Hugh Phillips