RUSSIA BEFORE,
DURING, AND AFTER
THE "KEYSTONE COUP"

I was in the USSR for fifty-four weeks in 1963-64 as a graduate student at Moscow University and left one week before the ouster of Communist Party chief Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchëv. I went again to Moscow on August 7, 1991 to attend the Eighteenth International Congress of Byzantine Studies, held at Moscow University. When it was over on the 15th, I was invited to attend an Italo-Russian bilateral historians conference on the First Rome and the Third Rome (Moscow viewed as the capital of Christianity after the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453) at the new Academy of Sciences palace at 32a Leninskii Prospekt, half-way between the Kremlin and Moscow University. I was staying at the four-and-one-half-year-old (but already dilapidated) dormitory of the Russian State Humanities University (RGGU—the former Moscow Historical-Archival Institute on the southern edge of Moscow when, at 8:30 on the morning of August 19 some of the other Americans staying at the RGGU dorm who had a radio informed me that there had been a coup.

I had been about to set off on the long-subway ride to work in the Lenin Library (the Soviet analog to the American Library of Congress), but decided that I should see what the coup was about before I got to work. The riders on the subway seemed extraordinarily subdued and pensive. Instead of getting off the metro at the Leninka, I rode to Dzerzhinskii Square, the location of the Lubianka, the home of the infamous KGB, and perhaps perversely, Detskii Mir ("Children's World," the now desperately pitiful Soviet attempt to combine Toys R Us and Kids R Us under one roof). I spent the next week on the streets, following the anticoup demonstrations around Moscow. After that, I spent another three weeks in Moscow in academic pursuits, and returned to Chicago on September 16.

My observations of current Russia are comparative, with the Soviet Union of 27-28 years ago, in the context of the course of
Russian history for the past twelve centuries. I am particularly interested in the level of material culture and in the extent of freedom in Russia. In many spheres there have been remarkable changes in Russia between the Khrushchev and Gorbachev eras, but there are also many continuities, some of them healthy, others disturbing.

On the material level, the clothing and diet of the Russians are topics of enduring interest. This became especially true in the era when Soviet propagandists alleged that their people actually did, or soon would, live better than anyone else on Earth because of the advantages of socialism, a centrally planned economy, control of the economy by experts who knew what they were doing, putative economies of scale, "rational" allocation of resources, and so forth. Now everyone realizes that all of that talk was a dream, then a sham, and finally a fraud whose sole purpose was the legitimation of the the holding of power by an over-centralized, dictatorial, arrogant, and ignorant elite.

In 1963 the USSR experienced a major crop failure, and in 1964 began to import grain in massive quantities from the USA. I remember vividly an old man with a long white beard eating garlic who told me that Soviet communists should form a solid line from Moscow to the Atlantic coast to pass the imported grain in buckets from hand to hand to save on transportation costs. Until the grain arrived in quantity in 1964, the Soviet bread, the real staff of life, deteriorated to the point that it was inedible, a half-raw mass allegedly extended with ground-up corn husks. Now bread is in short supply, and by late afternoon the bread stores are empty. The Lenin Library cafeteria, where I tried to eat twice a day because of the great difficulty of getting food, often did not have any bread. What bread there is, however, is quite edible. Everyone I met in Moscow agreed that the bread supply must be maintained, or another coup attempt is almost certain by February or March.

In 1964 the rest of the food supply was "normal." There was no flour in the food stores, but everything else could be found. Now the situation is more complex. Some would regard the food situation as already desperate, and for many people (particularly pensioners on fixed incomes, as I was told by a delegate to the Moscow city council), it must be. I saw no one starving, but was told that many are hungry. One frequently hears statements such as "Even eighteen months ago no one would have imagined that there would be absolutely nothing in the stores now." That just