In these post-Stalin, post-Soviet, post-Cold War, post-Yeltsin days, it is hard to recapture the feelings one had in the late forties and early fifties as someone interested in Russia and contemplating a career in Russian studies. The Soviet Union then was almost totally isolated and inaccessible to outsiders to a degree that seems all but impossible now. Our sources of information about Russia were restricted to the Soviet press (Pravda and Izvestia, and a few other magazines and newspapers), reports from the handful of Western newsmen in Moscow (about a dozen, I think) who were extremely restricted in whom they could speak to and where they could go. The only other Westerners in Russia were diplomats (only in Moscow) who were strictly controlled and unable to mingle with the local population.

We could, of course, read the great works of pre-revolutionary Russian writers and Soviet literature as well, but since the early thirties little of real power had appeared. How was one to evaluate the Socialist Realist novels without the possibility of seeing "real Russia"? Anyone who actually had been to Russia, and they were very few, was an automatic expert. Normal tourism was impossible. In my last year at the University of Chicago a left-leaning student returned to campus after attending a communist-sponsored youth rally of some sort in Moscow. He spoke no Russian and knew little about the country, but because he actually had seen it he filled a large auditorium with people anxious to hear "what it really was like." He had little to say except that "everyone he met wanted peace."

In March 1953 Stalin died, but it was not immediately clear what this would mean for someone interested in Russian studies. That fall I entered the Regional Studies Program on the Soviet Union at Harvard. A year or two later, at the beginning of the fall semester, a talk was given by several graduate students who had been able to join one of the very first tourist

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*For a vivid picture of what life was like for Western diplomats, see Leslie C. Stevens, *Russian Assignment* (Boston: Little Brown, 1953). Stevens was the American naval attaché in the late forties, spoke Russian and made the most of what limited opportunities were available to him.
trips to Russia the previous summer. It was just that, a standard tourist trip to Moscow and Leningrad. The remarkable thing about their talk was not what they said – what could they say after such a short, controlled visit? What was striking was the audience, not the graduate students like me, but all the eminent senior professors of the Harvard Russian Studies faculty: Merle Fainsod, Adam Ulam, Abram Bergson, Alexander Gerschenkron, Michael Karpovich, and so on. The “experts” came to hear the novices just because they actually had been there!

For those of us working in the field, the Soviet Union remained the remote “promised land,” although not quite as inaccessible as it had been before Stalin’s death. That situation changed radically in 1958 when the long-term academic exchange program, part of the overall cultural exchange agreement, went into effect. It became possible, for the first time since the nineteen thirties, for American graduate students to go to Russia for nearly a year and to do serious research.

I was extremely fortunate to be able to participate in the exchange in the second year of the program’s operation, 1959-60. Most of us were graduate students in the dissertation research stage of our work and the opportunity actually to do research in the USSR was one we never had dreamed of when we began our studies. It was an unexpected and exciting opportunity. We were briefed by the first year’s group who returned after a generally successful year, so we had some idea of what to expect in terms of the organization of Soviet academic life, as well as practical matters such as the climate, food, and so forth. A matter of great interest to me and the many other historians in the outgoing group was the question of access to the State Historical Archives. Although the first year’s group had no problem using the main library collections and some smaller manuscript depositories, none of them had been allowed to work in the main State Historical Archives, either in Moscow or in Leningrad. This was to be a central issue of our stay.

The exchange program was managed then by the Inter-University Committee on Travel Grants (IUCTG) directed most ably by David Munford. We did not travel as a group, but made our own individual ways to Moscow in mid-September 1959. I remember that I left the US the day after Khrushchev arrived for his famous tour of America. The anticipation of a return visit by Eisenhower the following spring and the generally favorable Soviet attitude toward the US in anticipation of that visit throughout the year was to be helpful to us until the fiasco of the U-2’s disastrous flight in May.

Although I was to spend my year at Leningrad State University, I flew into Moscow and first set foot on Soviet territory at Vnukovo airport. In those days the sight of a soldier with a red star on his cap still sent a little