

Naval Confidence-Building in Vladivostok

From June 3 to 7, a Canadian naval task group consisting of Her Majesty's Canadian Ships Huron, Kootenay, Annapolis and Provider visited the Soviet Far Eastern port of Vladivostok. The visit occurred under the umbrella of the military exchange agreement between Canada and the Soviet Union, signed in November 1989 during Prime Minister Mulroney's visit to the USSR. A reciprocal Soviet naval visit to Canada's West Coast is planned for 1991. The following paragraphs are drawn from the reports of Rear Admiral Peter Cairns, commander of the naval task group, and the Canadian Embassy in Moscow.

Admiral Cairns characterized the visit as follows: "I would say at the outset that the visit to Vladivostok was an outstanding success. Any less a superlative would, in my view, understate the case. Vladivostok has (with a few tightly controlled exceptions) been a closed city. This visit was the first time in 53 years that Westerners in significant numbers were allowed into the city with complete freedom of action, and the history of the occasion was not lost on the Soviets. From the time I set foot on land and partook of the traditional bread and salt welcoming ceremony until I completed the farewell handshakes and boarded Huron for departure, the inhabitants poured out their hearts to us, and our Canadian men and women responded with warmth, generosity and friendliness as only they can. You would have been proud to see them."

The Embassy observed that in extending the invitation to visit Vladivostok to Canada, the Soviet Union demonstrated unexpected openness. The ambitious schedule of events removed any lingering doubt about the Soviets' desire for the occasion to be "a special event for both sides." As the ships steamed into Vladivostok harbour on June 3, several thousand spectators were on the jetty, and buildings were festooned with English-language banners proclaiming peace, understanding and friendship.

This was to be but a small indication of the general public's response to the

Canadian presence during the four subsequent days. As the Embassy reported, "Soviet officials had obviously done considerable pre-visit preparation in alerting the local population, and while one is normally hesitant to wax so enthusiastically about civic attendance at public events in societies such as the USSR, spontaneity of outpouring of curiosity and warmth nevertheless clearly was obvious. The official welcome by the Soviet naval authorities and civilian city officials was equally warm and enthusiastic. One was left with the impression that the entire city of three quarters of a million people had been patiently waiting over 50 years for just such an event.

"Any suspicion that this reception was in any way contrived was immediately swept away by the reaction of the city's inhabitants to the presence of Canadian sailors and ships.

Uniformed Canadians were repeatedly mobbed by hundreds of curious and friendly onlookers on countless occasions. Soviet authorities freely allowed citizens to invite Canadians into their homes, although the highly-charged program prevented much contact of this kind. An estimated 30,000 people from all walks of Soviet life visited the Canadian ships. Many had to be turned away. Conversations among Canadians and Soviets on board and ashore were animated and open, with the latter asking many penetrating questions about Canada, its people, our way of life, and the Canadian Armed Forces. At the same time they were not reticent to talk about current events taking place in the USSR.

"The Canadian Naval Band played throughout the visits, most notably at an evening public concert, at which they offered a rendition of Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture, not played in its entirety in this city for over 30 years; they received a standing ovation. Individual vignettes of this kind are too numerous to men-

tion, but all were indicative of a special atmosphere prevailing throughout."

Soviet naval officers who visited Canadian vessels showed little interest in equipment, but were intensely curious about bread-and-butter issues such as terms and conditions of service in the Canadian Forces and the pay, care and feeding of personnel aboard Canadian ships. They took extensive videos of mess facilities and living quarters. Given the ongoing debate within the Soviet military about the merits of full professional volunteer forces, such keen interest was telling.

Soviet media covered the visit extensively. Canadians conducted interviews with all major Soviet press organiza-

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tions, both civilian and military. Coverage of the arrival and departure of ships was carried by state television, which also conducted interviews with Canadian service personnel. Japanese television crews were also on hand.

Summing up the visit, Soviet Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Gennady Khvatov declared that "President Gorbachev's visit to Canada and the stay of Canadian ships in Vladivostok will help our two nations forge closer contacts." He underlined the fact that Canada was an ally in the Second World War and remains a neighbour in the Asia-Pacific region today.

Admiral Cairns concluded his report by noting that "this visit did much to put a human touch to the process of openness that is going on in the USSR... I cannot conceive of how our men and women could have been any better ambassadors for Canada. There were thousands on the jetty to say goodbye, and when the last line was let go, there were few dry eyes to be found." ■