

We Need More Stanislav Petrovs

by Randy Kritkauský

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In September 1983, shortly after the Soviet military shot down Korean Airlines flight 007, a Russian lieutenant colonel, Stanislav Petrov (1939-2017), was on duty at an early warning tracking center and received information indicating that the United States had launched a nuclear missile which was being followed by five more missiles. Protocol required Petrov to immediately report such information. Had he done so it would have triggered a nuclear response by the Soviets. Something, perhaps intuition, perhaps a humbling awareness of the implications of his actions, or perhaps an ethical qualm, had the colonel hesitate long enough to determine that the perceived missiles were in fact an error in the Russian early warning system. One man's wisdom rising above military training, above the cold calculus of mechanical doomsday devices, and above the othering and dehumanization of the "enemy" prevalent during the depths of the Cold War saved the planet from descending into nuclear holocaust. Similar occurrences happened throughout the Cold War.

As we re-enter an era of potential hair-trigger responses and calculations of nuclear bullying, we cannot rely only on the dubious rationality behind "mutually assured destruction". One insane leader facing his own demise might decide to take his adversaries and countrymen with him in a suicide pact. In such cases technology will not be our salvation. We will need many courageous individuals like Stanislav Petrov who will pull us all back from the brink. We might well be saved by "the Russians" whose memories of the Cold War and actions in Ukraine might tempt us to once again collectively demonize.

Is it folly to pin our hopes on a few well placed unknown individuals? Or is it folly to pin our hopes on an outdated mechanized doomsday protocol like the one we see go awry in the 1964 dark comedy *Dr Strangelove*?

I am pinning my hopes on the hundreds of Russian friends and colleagues that we met and worked with during an all too brief window of glasnost and perestroika at the end of the 20th century. We hired dozens to work for our environmental non-profit, ECOLOGIA. We participated in cultural exchanges that brought hundreds of Russians to the United States. Other organizations like ours engaged in "citizen diplomacy" and Sister City projects. Eventually, we were disinvited, harassed, and ultimately compelled to abandon our projects of mutual cooperation across Russia as a xenophobic government took control. But, before we exited, we had sown seeds of trust and mutual understanding. Along with our Russian colleagues, we had discovered our common humanity, and even developed a sense of being members of a global civil society transcending national identity. The warmth of those days now survives as dimly glowing embers that may yet produce another Stanislav Petrov. Or, as entirely homegrown anti-

war demonstrations across Russia have suggested, a burning desire for peace is being manifested in the uprising of citizens who see through propaganda and realize that their well being, actually the survival of their society, lies in reason and caution, not in knee jerk responses and pressing the launch button.

In 1999 I experienced an opportunity to promote cross-cultural understanding in the face of another escalating international conflict when a trip I had planned to China was jeopardized by the United States bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. US citizens were advised not to travel to China as our embassy in Beijing was being besieged by student protesters who hurled stones. Instead of cancelling my trip, our organization and Chinese partner NGO planned to plant a "Friendship Forest" at the Great Wall. It was designed as a gesture challenging the notion that distant foreigners are all enemies. Busloads of Chinese of all ages participated. Media coverage was phenomenal. I stayed up all night composing a brief speech about peace and understanding which could not be quoted out of context. I asserted that it was the role and responsibility of citizens to create a time and space for national leaders to safely return to when they need to shift the rhetoric from one of conflict to one of peaceful cooperation. Millions of Chinese TV viewers heard me interviewed. It was my hope then, and is so now, that if China and the United States ever found themselves in an eye-ball to eye-ball confrontation, someone who had participated in the Friendship Forest tree planting would be in the room and would counsel reason and reflective hesitation rather than hurtling towards escalation, because they had once made friends with an American stranger.

It was with that same expectation that we engaged in collaborative activities across Russia in the 1990s. Rather than planting trees we had sought to plant the seeds of civil society. Many of our efforts were short term successes but quite likely had no enduring impact. Like trees planted on an arid hillside in the shadows of the Great Wall, most civil society seedlings do not survive. However, since we were not alone in our work in Russia, we must hope that our efforts, or those of the hundreds of foreign NGOs who worked in Russia, have succeeded in placing some seeds of understanding and peace on fertile ground where they have survived even the chill of Russian winters. If I could locate and identify one such seedling now, I would name it Stanislav Petrov and nurture it.

Let us continue, as individuals within our own countries and reaching across international borders, to build bridges of citizen diplomacy with fellow human beings, together.

Randy Kritkauský is the co-founder of ECOLOGIA (www.ecologia.org) an international environmental NGO that has worked with civil society partners in places including China and Russia since 1989. Contact: rkritkauský@ecologia.org phone: (+1) 802-623-8075 Middlebury, Vermont, USA