

OUCH! Mikhail

Our Secret Weapon in Ukraine



by Reg Green

Russians may not be able to buy Starbucks caffè mistos or Bolshoi Maks any longer but they can live without them. In World War II Britain we ate horsemeat and it only made us more determined not to give way. Dresden was reduced to a ball of fire and German civilian morale didn't crack.

But reading today that Imperial Brands is stopping all sales of cigarettes may signal the end is nigh. This is not to single out Russians from the rest of humanity. A famous *New Yorker* writer used to compose while walking up and down in his long apartment with an ashtray and a lit butt at each end of the room, from which he took a puff each time he passed. But the dependence of soldiers on cigarettes is legendary and long periods of inactivity are the most demoralising of conditions. Just think of the men in that convoy outside Kyiv.

I once had to meet a Russian television producer, Olga, and cameraman, Mikhail, at Los Angeles airport. They'd just arrived from Petersburg and he looked close to death. He'd held out heroically, counting down the minutes in the 12-hour flight, but now the free world offered relief.

Shock #1 was that, as the loudspeaker made clear every few seconds, smoking at the terminal was not allowed and that we didn't have time for him to go to one of the safe havens. Olga bundled him into my car where, though I was quite willing to save his life, she sternly forbade it. This was his first visit to the US and I could tell by his almost unendurable fidgeting that to him it was like a descent into hell.

At last we reached the hotel, he pulled out a pack and Olga nodded agreement. As he was about to light up, however, I nudged his elbow and pointed to a sign that said "Smoking is not permitted within 15 ft. of this building." I read his mind. "If this is capitalism, give me the Gulag."

Likewise, the Russian army marches on its lungs. So, in addition to stashing every cigarette in Ukraine and providing MiGs, the Stingers and the rest of the desperately-needed equipment, let's fill every available truck with Camels and Marlboros for the equally-addicted defenders. They'll do what Betty Grable did for the GIs in Germany.