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Several thousand wait in line to sample the Soviet Union's first fast food.

## Moscow Plays Ketch-Up

### Fast Food Comes to Slow Food Capital

By Michael Dobbs

Washington Post Foreign Service

MOSCOW, Jan. 31—Factory worker Mikhail Negilko stood beneath a pair of glistening golden arches, preaching to the crowd with the enthusiasm of a convert. He had seen the future—and it tasted good.

"Tell us, what is this Beeg Mak?" shouted an elderly matron with red-dyed hair, looking suspiciously at a line of several thousand Muscovites three blocks from the Kremlin.

"The *Bolshoi Mak*, comrades," announced Negilko importantly, clutching three paper McDonald's flags in one hand and a carry-out bag crammed with disposable cups and plates in the other. "The *Bolshoi Mak* is like something you've never tasted before. You

take a bun, a very tasty bun, and you cut it in half. Then you add some grilled meat, top quality meat, mind you, not like the meat we get here. Then some cheese, then very many vitamins and . . ."

Negilko paused to consider the sensation produced on his taste buds by his first encounter with capitalism. "And then you add some spinach. And that, comrades, is the *Bolshoi Mak*." Russians generally do not eat lettuce, and many have never seen it.

After nearly 14 years of tortuous negotiations, the American institution of fast food has finally arrived in Moscow, the slow food capital of the world. Today, in what could herald the start of a gastronomic-cum-cultural revolution in the homeland of scientific communism, McDonald's

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# Muscovites Line Up To Try 'Bolshoi Mak'

MOSCOW, From A1

opened its first restaurant in the Soviet Union.

The launch of the Bolshoi Mak is, in some ways, the ultimate challenge—for both the world's largest fast-food chain and the world's largest country. Restaurants in the Soviet Union are renowned for their surly service, appalling hygiene, intimidating doormen, deafening bands and absence of half the items on the menu. Reserving a table can be an achievement in itself.

A splash of brilliant color in the middle of a gray city, the McDonald's restaurant in Pushkin Square is an uncompromising chunk of Americana transplanted to the middle of Russia, a capitalist icon in a communist setting. "If you can't go to America, come to McDonald's in Moscow," is the slogan in the ads on the Soviet Union's new commercial TV channel. Judging by the crowds that turned out today, millions of Soviet citizens seem likely to take up the offer.

By the time McDonald's opened for business at 10 this morning, there was already a 500-yard line outside the door. Militiamen stood by to prevent a riot. Television cameras whirred. Actors dressed as cartoon characters danced in the street to amuse the crowds. Soviet employees frantically cleared snow from the sidewalk. The great Russian masses shuffled forward, discussing the relative merits of *dvoini gamburger* (double hamburger), *kartofel-freet* (french fries) and "ice-lay-oh-feesh."

"Who cares how long we have to wait?" said Viktor Kondratyev, a worker in a trading cooperative. "We're used to standing in line. We stand in line for hours, sometimes days. We are accustomed to this."

Kondratyev said he had once eaten a chunk of dried meat advertised as a *gamburger* (the Russian alphabet has no "h") at a railway station but that it was practically inedible. He was eager to taste the American equivalent.

"We are interested in everything American," said Lena Kalashova, who lost her job at the Ministry of Agriculture after her department was disbanded as a cost-saving measure. "We came here because we thought this would be an unforgettable experience."

"Finding a decent place to eat is one of our biggest problems," complained Gena Popov, an auto mechanic, standing in line with his wife, Rima. "This place looks different just from the outside. Everything is so clean and bright."

At the door, the guests were greeted by the smiling face of George Cohen, chairman of McDonald's of Canada and the man behind the Moscow project. The 900-seat restaurant in Pushkin Square—the largest McDonald's in the world—is the first of 20 outlets scheduled to open in the Soviet capital in the next few years.

"For Soviet rubles only," announced a brass sign nearby, a not-so-subtle dig at the growing number of restaurants and shops here that cater only to Westerners or the handful of privileged Soviet citizens with freely convertible foreign currencies. McDonald's claims it can make a profit from its ruble income by buying and processing Soviet food products, such as cod and potatoes, and using them in its outlets in West European countries. But its

next Moscow restaurant will accept hard currency only.

The food counter was a scene of frenzied activity almost certainly unparalleled in the history of Soviet dining. Teenagers in black slacks and maroon T-shirts rushed around like bees in a hive, shoveling *gamburgers* into styrofoam packages. Everyone was wearing "How Can I Help You" buttons in their lapels and McSmiles on their faces.

The workers—27,000 applications were received for 630 jobs—are paid 1.5 rubles an hour, close to the Soviet average wage. "It's too little—we have to work much harder than most Soviet workers," said Marina Konolova, a student at Moscow Financial College, scrubbing tables furiously.

At Soviet wage levels, the Bolshoi Mak is expensive. The average Soviet worker must toil for two and a half hours to earn 3.85 rubles for a Bolshoi Mak. In the United States, it takes the average worker less than 20 minutes to earn enough for a Big Mac.

"We certainly could not afford to eat here every day," said Ksana Vasyuk, a Moscow office worker, as she tried to figure out how to insert the straw into her strawberry milkshake. "This is a high-class restaurant by our standards."

But even as the Soviet customers slurped down their milkshakes and punched through their *dvoini chizburgers*, there were dark forebodings that McDonald's standards may begin to slip as soon as the Canadians go back home.

"They'll use these disposable plates and cups for one and a half months. Then they'll go back to dirty saucers and glasses, like we have in our restaurants. It will all go downhill. We don't know how to run a restaurant like this," said Andrei Grushin, an engineer.

A commentary in *Izvestia*, the Soviet government newspaper, was equally pessimistic. "I don't know if the heads of the McDonald's corporation realize the trials that await them in Moscow," wrote Stanislav Kondrashev, a veteran foreign policy commentator, suggesting that the Pushkin Square outlet could simply be "swept away by crowds of curious people" or ensnared in a web of corruption.

"As a realist, I do not exclude the possibility that, in six months, McDonald's will run away from the most ambitious project in their history. The managers will be lifted out by helicopter straight from the roof of the cafeteria, just as American diplomats were airlifted out of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon in the spring of 1975," he predicted, only half in jest.

McDonald's managers insist that they are committed to staying in the Soviet market, come what may. They have invested \$35 million in a massive meat-processing, dairy and bakery complex outside Moscow—dubbed "McGulag" by visitors because of the barbed wire that surrounds it. They are also sending their top Soviet executives to "Hamburger University" in Chicago to train them.

Factory worker Negilko, however, was taking no chances. Just in case McDonald's closes tomorrow, he already has a complete set of styrofoam cups and plates to show his workmates and his children.

"You use these once only. Once only, I tell you. You use them and then throw them away," he explained to the waiting crowd.

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A Russian woman samples her first "gamburger" at the Moscow McDonald's.

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After hours' wait, a Muscovite enjoys his carry-out hamburger and milkshake.

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