

# SOVIET HAMS RALLY AGAINST COUP

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## Radio amateurs play a key role in the struggle to sustain the drive toward democracy

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*Edward Kritsky, NT2X*

I left the Soviet Union almost 12 years ago, nineteen at the time, telling myself that this is forever, that I will never again see the city of my birth, my childhood friends and college buddies. As they say in Russia, you are a "cut loaf of bread" when you leave – you leave for good.

But while most Soviet emigrants have no way to keep in touch with their loved ones (it was 1970-th, Cold War era, and you can't make a call or send a letter to U.S.S.R. without risk to jeopardize their wellbeing), Amateur Radio has linked me to my homeland for the past 10 years.

For many years, my Soviet radio friends wanted me to visit them. Finally, in August of 1991, I made the trip, which coincided with the Leningrad International Amateur Radio Hamvention.



Edward Kritsky NT2X, 1989



Leningrad, 1991. Participants of the Leningrad International Amateur Radio Hamvention.

HAMs are HAMs, no matter where you are – always a most friendly, most hospitable crowd. Leningrad Hamvention is not too different from Dayton Hamvention in this respect – discussions into the late night hours, reminiscing about on-the-air happenings, seeing friendly faces, drinking vodka and who knows what else. It was a wonderful occasion, one that included an official amateur station, 4L3IR.



Moscow, 1991. From left to right: Andy RW3AH, Rick K1CE, Romeo 3W3RR, Andy UA3AB.

Among the visitors to Leningrad was Rick Palm, K1CE, from ARRL Headquarters; Soviet hams were eager to learn what they could about Amateur Radio emergency communications. Rick did a super job of introducing everyone to emergency communications in the US and did his best to understand the problems and the challenges that lay ahead for his Soviet counterparts.

Andy RW3AH, Harry RA3AUU, and Romeo 3W3RR, are the nucleus of the Russian Amateur Radio Emergency Service. They and Palm conducted important talks leading to better understanding,

future projects, and the building of a common ground in joint emergency works [NOTE: "see "ARES in the USSR", October 1991, QST, pp 16-17"].

My trip wasn't only for pleasure, however. I was in the Soviet Union on business, with several cities to visit: Leningrad, Riga, Moscow, Volgograd and Omsk. But in the evenings, I was free to roam, to meet many friends, including Yuri [YL2DX](#) (chief operator at YL1XX), Larry YL3CW (of YA0RR fame), my old buddy Alex YL2AG, Val UQ2HO, Serge UQ2MU, Igor UQ2OB, Alex (*NT2X 2013: now RG5A*) and Leon from YL1WW. I've talked to all of them for years and meeting them was the most logical continuation of my exploits of the airwaves.



Moscow, December, 1990. Preparations for the YA0RR DX-pedition. From left to right: Harry RA3AUU, Larry YL3CW, and Andy RW3AH.

The realities of life in the U.S.S.R. and the Baltics are such that one has to get used to shortages and shortcomings everywhere. Prices get higher and living gets tougher by the day. But there is no lack of warmth and generosity, however. Late into the night, we laughed, shared the last loaf of bread and can of fish in the house and talked about what unites us all, no matter where we live. It was wonderful to be there, knowing that people are free to come and go as they please (such a change!).

Moscow, the capital of the U.S.S.R., is a city of 20,000 streets. Even taxi drivers don't know the city by heart. It's a mad place, like every large European city, with everybody rushing somewhere and no end to the flow of cars and people. I was met by my friend Romeo Stepanenko (whose latest





City of Moscow, end of 1980s.

exploit was the Burma operation of XY0RR). Romeo lives in the city and works at a private enterprise – something unknown in Russia just a decade ago.

Since returning from a July visit to the United States, Romeo had been busy preparing for his upcoming expedition to Burma. As nothing is ever simple in the Soviet Union, there were difficulties to overcome. The team was driving all over Moscow trying to buy backpacks, tents, wire, rope, medicine (just in case), and so on.

Buying tickets to Burma also posed a problem. There were none for sale at the ticket office. But that didn't sway "Romeo the Unstoppable". Furthermore, Romeo's visa application hadn't been processed, so he was unable to fly to Japan to pick up the equipment that YAESU had offered for the expedition: three sets of FT-990/FL-7000.

Then, I imprudently mentioned that we Americans don't need a visa to enter Japan. Romeo exploded with enthusiasm: "Ed, you are going to Japan, even if it's for just one day. You are the only person who can save the day!" he said. Romeo called the next day: "You are flying in three hours, get your things packed, not a minute to waste!"

This was August 16, 1991, just two days before the attempted coup would begin. I had exactly five minutes to pack a small bag for the trip to Japan. Romeo managed to change his ticket to my name, and although we got to Sheremetjevo-2 airport with 15 minutes to spare, it was too late to register for an international flight. But somehow we managed to contraband me on board. By the way, I left the U.S.S.R. without an entry visa to get back in!



Miami, 1998. Takashi JA2JPA, visiting Romeo 3W3RR.

At the end of a nine-hour flight, I was met in Narita airport, Japan, by Koji JS6BLS/1, who works at the airport, and by Takashi JA2JPA, who coordinated all preparations in Japan for the DX-pedition to Burma. Romeo called Takashi at 3 AM Tokyo time, warning of my impending arrival.

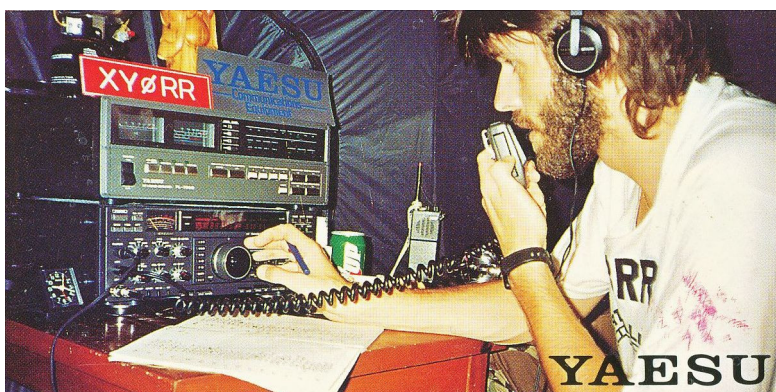
Throughout the day I phoned the Soviet Embassy, finally speaking to someone about 5 PM. "We got the telex from Moscow," calm voice said. "Yes, we can issue a visa if you come before seven. It will cost you \$80 on the spot." An hour later, with visa in hand, we

finally retired to the home of Toshi, JA1ELY (publisher & editor of [59 Magazine](#), who held the YAESU equipment. Both Koji and Takashi Ajiro were exhausted and soon departed, leaving me with the task of repacking three sets of transceivers/PA.

I returned to Moscow on the evening of August 17 and we celebrated our good fortune into the night.

On the morning of 18th, we were rudely awakened by a phone call at 7 o'clock. It was Harry's mother: "get up and turn on the TV." The first words I understood were "... mortal danger over the U.S.S.R." It was scary stuff. Somber-faced anchor people read words that made no sense. The word "coup" was on everyone's mind. What happens now, not just to me, but all of us?

Both Moscow TV channels began showing a Dickens-esque British movie. The radio was playing classical music. There was no news to be found. We hooked up one of the new YAESU transceivers and tried to pick up a broadcast from the BBC, Deutsche Welle, or even a Voice of America station. But there wasn't anything interesting and reliable there except some general comments. We tried to telephone outside of Moscow and it looked like the phone system was out of order. We could still make calls throughout the city, however, and people could call in from other cities.



Birma, 1991. XYØRR DX-pedition. Romeo 3W3RR, operating on YAESU equipment.

I thought to myself: "I probably have no more business being here, my trip has come to a screeching halt, and it's time to leave." But I couldn't leave my friends, and I was curious about what would take place in the next few hours – are these people going to take this silently and it's back to the old communist rule, or will there be a fight? Was there something I could do to help them?

I had to contact my family. They would be worried sick in the next few hours (it was late night in the United States). Little did I know that before midnight on the 17th the news got out to the United States and news stations were reporting the happenings all night to the people of America. I got behind the radio and tried to get someone in Europe to make a phone call. Unfortunately, my wire antenna wasn't doing a good job and the only fellow I contacted (in Great Britain) faded into oblivion. Another HAM said that he lives off his pension and he couldn't make an expensive trans-Atlantic call to New York. We heard some Soviet amateurs on the air who were making ordinary contacts. Propagation was lousy. Gena, UA9MA, who was to go to Burma with Romeo, called from Omsk. "Gena", we told him, "come to Moscow, quickly, or there could be no planes flying soon." Romeo was going ahead with his DX-pedition plans, no matter what.



Moscow, August 1991. Crowds of people gathered by the Russian White House.

"Gena, get hold of someone in the United States and ask them to call my mom or brother and tell them I'm fine." I said. I later learned that UA9MA contacted John Kanzius K3TUP, who made the



first phone call. Harry RA3AUU, Roman 4K2OT, and Andy UA3AB strung a dipole, and our sparkling new YAESU equipment was fully operational. But staying at home wasn't something anyone wanted to do. We caught a taxi and went to the center of Moscow.



Moscow, August 1991. Crowds of people gathered by the Russian White House.

It struck me that there was absolutely no reflection of the coup on the streets. Our driver didn't know a thing. Even militia-men (policemen), as we found later, learned of the coup only when they reported for duty. As we were getting closer to the center, the scenery started to change. Suddenly there were lines of armored personnel carriers and rows of tanks moving toward the center of the city.

I had a video camera with me and started taping what I saw, scared it could be bad for my health. As we got to the area not far from the

Kremlin, the flow of traffic suddenly stopped. We got out of the car and looked. There were crowds of people everywhere, cheering "Yeltsin, Yeltsin..." Lots of Russian flags were evident (the old tri-color white-blue-red flag, not the red "hammer and sickle"). Three men fearlessly raised a huge tri-color on a cherry-picker, high above the crowd. A column of military camouflaged personal carriers was stopped and people were climbing on them to start impromptu meetings. Here and there, people displayed large sheets of paper, calling everyone on a general strike. The crowd was electrified. As I was filming, I asked Romeo and Harry to keep me in sight, as anything was possible and secret police must have been amongst us. I later learned that several foreign reporters lost their cameras, so my fears were well founded.

I made several attempts to call New York, and finally talked to my brother Alex, who urged me to leave the U.S.S.R. at any cost and with maximum speed. He said that they were showing some very scary stuff on TV – yet I hadn't seen any of the streets of Moscow. I told Alex that I would try to get on the air and that he should tell my friends to listen for me on 20 meters.



Moscow, August 21, 1991. Dmitrij Guskov UV3DCX, operating on the YA0RR ICOM transceiver from the Russian White House.

That night, we were at RA3AUU's flat when we received a phone call from Boris Yeltsin's headquarters. They were setting up an amateur radio station at the Russian White House. They feared that if military junta cut off phone lines to the White House they would have no means of communication. All official broadcasting facilities were under the control of the putschists (coup leaders). Yeltsin's democratic forces had no way to broadcast to the rest of the country. We told that radio

operators were needed, and the three of us – Harry, Romeo, and I – were ready to go to the White

House on a moments' notice. Another call half an hour later, however, told us to stand by. We wound up not going, except Romeo 3W3RR, who took a small IC-726 transceiver to the White House, where it was prominently featured on CNN – an ICOM with "YA0RR" sign on it. He took my photo camera as well, so some pictures had been made on R3A and inside of White House.

Harry took some coax to enable the operators at the White House to transmit on several bands simultaneously. They were linked by a hand-held transceiver to the Moscow 2-meter network. The call sign chosen for the operation was R3A. Soon, another station, R3B, began transmitting on 7.044 and 14.175 MHz. I spent a lot of time listening to their broadcasts. These were decrees issued by Boris Yeltsin himself, right there at his headquarters. Decrees that declared the junta unlawful and branding anyone supporting its actions a criminal.



The war of decrees escalated between Yeltsin's broadcasts and the coup leaders, who controlled the newspapers and television. R3A would broadcast and then stand by for signal reports from various parts of the country. The R3A operators openly advised amateurs to weigh the risks of getting on the air and suggested using made-up call signs and names (which some of them did).

In many towns, statements heard from R3A in Moscow were immediately fed to local newspapers and radio and television stations. In a number of places, including Leningrad, amateurs went to municipal governments and set up stations on site. I know of several such HAMs, including UA1ADU, UA1AKM, UA1AEE and RA1ADB, all of them in Leningrad. This list is only the tip of the iceberg.



Moscow, August 1991. Coup hams operating from R3A radiostation, Russian White House.

In the city of Nikolaev, in the Ukraine, Yuri RB5ZM, owns the satellite dish. During the crisis, he fed CNN directly into the town's cable system. Despite threatening phone calls that he "would be put away" and "we'll get to you yet", he continued his efforts and didn't quit.

I could hear a pileup of calls coming back to R3A with information and heartily thanks for the news. This free flow of truth wasn't to everyone's liking, however. The junta's military started jamming these transmissions. So a powerful technique not available to regular broadcasters was utilized: "QSY 5 up!" The operators would jump 5 KHz and continue the operation. I don't think jamming can be effective against Amateur Radio. Since I was also operating UA3A/NT2X, the military decided to jam me as well; they probably didn't know much about call signs and "3A" was all they needed to hear.

HAMs took an active pro-democratic position. Dozens upon dozens of them tuned to R3A and R3B and reported local events. In the beginning, the operators at



R3A asked for assistance in tracking the military in and around Moscow. Similar calls went out to other regions. News took time to seep through, and I believe people in the West were far better informed than the Soviets were. While in Moscow as UA3A/NT2X, I heard news items given to me over the air from the West that hadn't yet made it to R3A.

My UA3A/NT2X operation began on the evening of the August 19 with a lot of help from Andy Chesnokov UA3AB. Twenty meters sounded empty when I heard N2BFH. I made contact and asked him to phone my friends in New York, and bring them on frequency. It was tremendously satisfying to suddenly be in the midst of a friendly pileup, with voices and calls familiar and dear. Long live packet radio – an empty band was transformed in a matter of minutes! My friend Peter KU2M contacted my brother Alex and let him know that I was fine. Everyone was eager to hear something. I later learned that many people were concerned about my well-being (for that I'm grateful).

I spent a lot of time describing what transpired throughout the day what I saw and thought. Someone even asked me if what I said could go on PacketCluster, as an eyewitness account of events. At that point Bob Reed WB2DIN informed the U.S. Department of State of the R3A operation and they began monitoring. Knowing that I was going to leave soon, people wished me luck and a safe trip home. My operation continued for the next several days. Because there wasn't much we could do at the Yeltsin HQ, we decided that it would be logical to have an operation of our own while we continued to monitor R3A. Harry RA3AUU, Romeo 3W3RR (who returned from R3A on August 21), Serge UZ0AA, Roman 4K2OT, Gena UA9MA, Al from UZ4FWD and I decided we would defy the junta's orders and transmit for as long as we were free to do so. In a way it became a joint statement: "It's not over until it's over, our voices must be heard now, in this critical time, for as long as we could be heard, hope was alive." UA3A/NT2X, in effect, became a club call, with several operators going around the clock. Several thousands QSOs were made, and a special QSL issued.

DJ2PJ made a phone call to the States and told my mother I was OK. A HAM in Great Britain also helped me talk to home. An amateur in Michigan interviewed me on 20 meters for his local TV station. A 'New York Newsday' reporter called my house in New York looking for information on events in Russia, but started gathering information on me when he learned where I was.



Dima Guskov UV3DCX summed up the role of Amateur Radio in this victory for democracy in the Soviet Union:

"It was obvious that amateur communications in extreme situations are in no way inferior to professional. And amateur radio operators, in their ability to expand their coverage and to react quickly to changing situations, are unsurpassed." What more can be said?

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