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Culture comes first in Moscow

MOSCOW — There is a great deal more to the Soviet Union than scenes of lines of angry shoppers or protesting dissidents that are a staple of reporting here in Moscow.

On Sunday night, for example, I went to the Bolshoi Theatre for the debut of a new production of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Le Cag d'Or*.

It was a lush performance. I was thrilled. But not my Soviet friends, whom I met by chance during intermission.

As they criticized the performance as being too westernized, we were joined by two smartly dressed ladies who quickly offered their opinions. Soon we had a group discussion in English on the finer points of Russian 19th-century music.

One of the ladies was a fashion stylist, the other a PhD in electrical engineering. I mention this pleasing encounter because it illustrates the other side of Soviet life that most westerners fail to see. Russians are among the world's most cultured and best educated people.

In fact, the average Soviet citizen is considerably more knowledgeable about history, art, geography

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and even foreign affairs than most westerners — in spite of the party's rigid control of all information.

Reading in the Soviet Union is still a favorite pastime rather than a dying art. Our own wretched pop culture of Gothic romances, soap operas and wretched has not, so far, disfigured Soviet life.

The Communist party has long — and rightly — prided itself in continuing the glorious Russian tradition of promoting the classical arts. The USSR remains a world leader of opera, ballet, drama and literature. You cannot walk anywhere in Moscow or in magnificent Leningrad without being reminded by busts and plaques of past artists and writers.

True enough, the younger generation wants rock

records and skateboards. Would Russians really rather listen to Mozart than Michael Jackson? Many probably would. There is something comforting here in watching neatly dressed, well-mannered youngsters going off to their ballet or violin lessons. The USSR remains a very conservative society.

Russians are enormously proud. But they also have a deep inferiority complex towards the westerners who laugh at threadbare Soviet society and its shabby people.

Here are some of the world's best-educated people living in a country where hardly anything works; a Third World country with First World minds.

That's why President Ronald Reagan's Evil Empire remark so deeply hurt the Russians. Once again, they were being relegated to inferior status — not to mention moral exile.

Now that Reagan's in Moscow, he'll probably have to eat his words about the Evil Empire. His California team, which seems to get most of its knowledge of the world from TV, will go to the Bolshoi tomorrow. What they see may surprise them.