GAY ACTIVISTS AT THE BARRICADE

By Tom Boellstorff, Stanford University

I magine what it would be like to wake up and find that President Bush had been arrested in Kennebunkport and Dan Quayle, Jesse Helms, and Colin Powell had taken over the country. This scenario is the best analogy I can find for my recent experiences in the Soviet Union. The three-and-a-half days of the coup were some of the most exciting and fearful in my life. I experienced a pivotal moment in world history firsthand and saw how this crisis impacted the gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities in Moscow.

The mood in the first hours of the coup was one of intense fear and uncertainty. Shortly after seizing power, the new government announced that it would consider as enemies "criminals and immoral elements." Since homosexuality is constitutionally illegal in Russia and other republics, all Soviet gay, lesbian, and bisexual people could be considered criminals. In addition, the term "immoral elements" seemed to target the gay and bisexual community. Also, on the first day of the putsch, the authorities forced a doctor at the AIDS clinic in Moscow to compile a list of all HIV-positive people served by the clinic (about 600 names) and turn it in. To date, the whereabouts of this list are unknown.

Roman Kalinin, the President of the Moscow Union of Lesbians and Gay Men and the editor of *Tema*, was worried for his safety. He said that if the government started to arrest social activists, he would be among the first thousand. He decided to move into the apartment in which I was living, since its location and phone number were kept secret

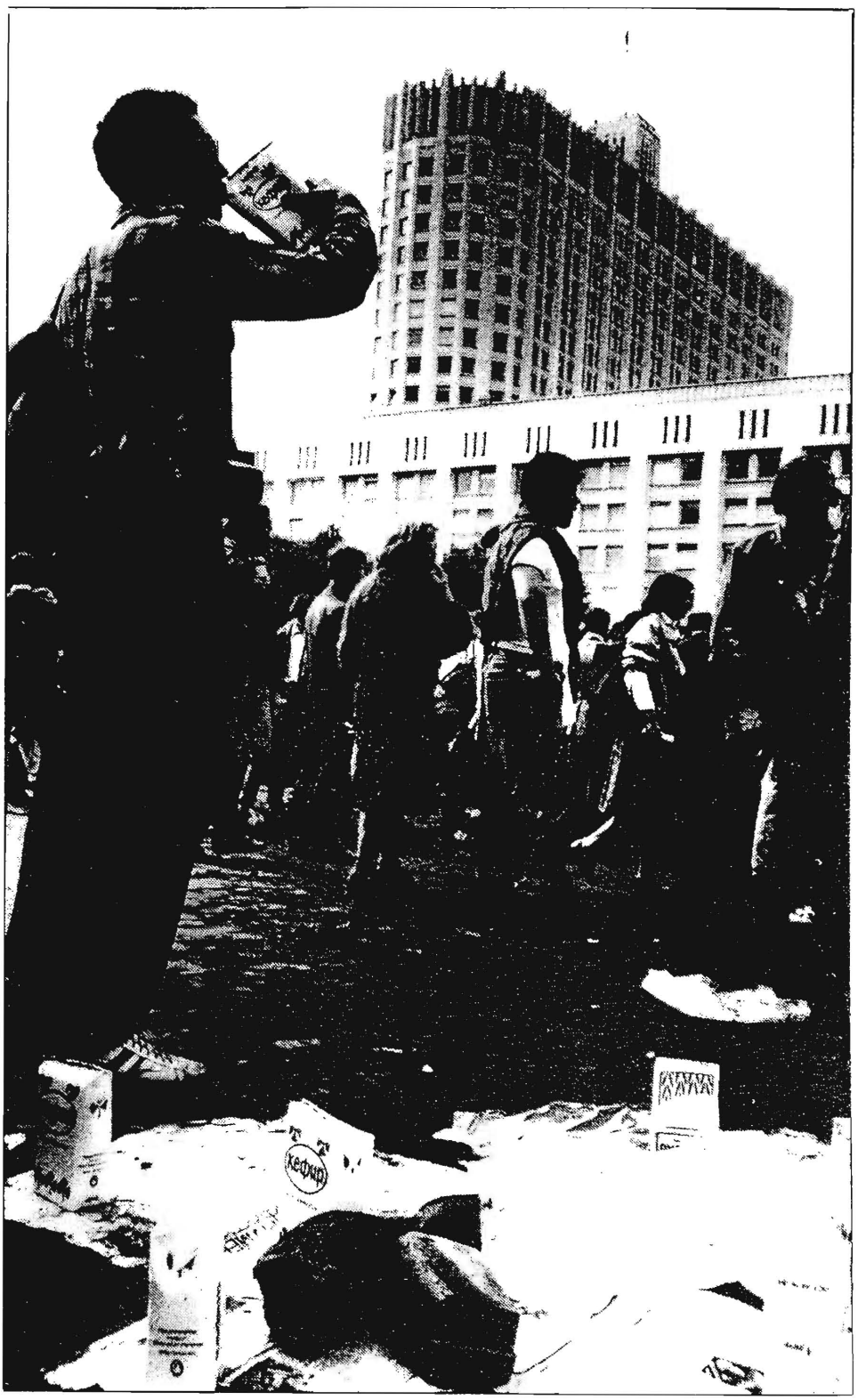

Photo by V. Kozlova

Tom Boellstorff graduated from Stanford University in June with a BA in linguistics. He arrived in Moscow in July and has been working there as a representative of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. In addition to helping organize the Moscow Union of Lesbians and Gay Men, Tom has been assisting in the development of Tema, *the first and largest gay publication in the USSR.*

By this time (around 4:30 P.M.), announcements by pro-democracy leaders like Yeltsin had already been posted at the entrances to metro stations and surrounded by crowds of eager readers. Soon after I came home, all newspapers except the official Communist papers were banned. *Tema* was now an underground paper. As we ate dinner, Roman and the other gay men seemed more tense than ever.

There was no hint that the coup might fail, and the future of gay people in the Soviet Union looked bleak.

The next day, Genady Roshchupkin (an AIDS activist), Roman, another gay man, and I travelled to Manezh Square, only to find it sealed off by rows of trucks, tanks, and armored personnel carriers. It was a baffling sight: children playing on top of the tanks that occupied the center of their city, Russians pleading with the soldiers (almost all from ethnically non-Russian republics) to disobey their orders, crowds of shoppers and onlookers walking down streets scarred by tank treads.

We then walked to the headquarters of the Moscow City Council, where Yeltsin's statements and other pro-democracy announcements were posted. We took copies of these proclamations, which were typed and photocopied so poorly that they were barely legible, and returned to my apartment. There we had a Macintosh LC, a Laserwriter, and a photocopying machine, all provided by the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. This equipment made my apartment one of the most advanced publishing centers in Moscow which had not been shut down by the putschists. We retyped the proclamations on the Mac, laserprinted them, and then photocopied hundreds, transforming them into high-quality leaflets.

Our work kept us busy and gave us hope, but as night fell the atmosphere in Moscow grew more strained. Around 10:00 P.M., the tanks began moving towards the Russian Parliament. We listened to pro-democracy radio operating from inside the Parliament building as the citizens fought back. We heard that several people had been injured and at least three killed. Some of us started to cry. We went to bed not knowing what we would find in the morning—but fearing the worst.

The next day (August 21), our group went to the Russian Parliament to distribute the new fliers we had made and to see the place where fighting had raged only twelve hours before. Even in the cold pouring rain, a couple thousand people huddled outside the building. Unarmed citizen militias guarded and fortified the barricades which now surrounded the Parliament. Outside of five armored guards and three rebel tanks around the perimeter of the building, the Parliament was apparently guarded entirely by everyday citizens—men and women, young and old, straight, gay, lesbian, and bisexual.

I was amazed by the organization at the front of the Parliament building. There was a central informational clearinghouse, a media center, a food bank, a space for posting announcements, and several different meetings taking place. Two women swept debris from the courtyard in the rain, while two other women worked to unplug a drain. Every few minutes, people carrying boxes of what appeared to be food would enter the building itself, but most of the action was taking place outside. We went to the central clearinghouse and gave our leaflets to a pro-democracy leader for distribution. For this second round of fliers the Russians added a small *Tema* logo to acknowledge who had made them.

Soon, rumors began to spread that the coup was beginning to fail. Cars all over the city began to honk their horns, and troops started to withdraw. Yet six hours after the apparent failure of the coup, citizens at the Parliament building continued to guard the building and even to prepare for the possibility of a new attack. Not until the sun rose on the morning of August 22 was the coup safely over. But the threat of such crises will not disappear until a democratic system is firmly in place.

Gay, lesbian, and bisexual people played a crucial role in the coup resistance. Beyond working out of our office, they guarded the barricades day and night, made speeches from the Parliament building to hundreds of thousands, and galvanized the pro-democracy movement. These gay people define themselves first as activists for democracy. Roman Kalinin himself told me at a demonstration that he "wanted to be straight" in the context of that demonstration. In this instance, the members of the gay community kept their sexual identities in the background—though not from fear of discrimination or attack.For gay Russians, their democratic activism cannot be separated from their struggle for their own minority rights. In the context of the putsch, democracy came first.

Unfortunately, there is some doubt whether the gay community will be properly credited for its part in the coup resistance. There is no knowledge of *any* gay person being openly gay during the putsch, and the gay community does not plan to "stake its claim" for its resistance efforts.

Indeed, the outlook for gay Russians in general seems somewhat uncertain in the wake of the putsch. Most with whom I have spoken have expressed optimism about the prospects for greater freedom and equal rights. The downfall of the hard-line Communists and the restructuring of the KGB provide grounds for hope. But in post-putsch Russia, many different groups are vying for power. Some of them, in particular the nationalist (even Tsarist) groups, are no friends to gay people. Polls taken before the coup showed that in "cosmopolitan" Moscow, 30 percent of respondents thought gay people should be killed, 30 percent recommended imprisonment, 30 percent thought gay people should be confined in psychiatric wards, and only 10 percent felt that gay people should be free. In rural areas, the percentage wanting the death penalty for gay people hovers around 85 percent.

Obviously, one-person, one-vote democracy in the Soviet Union could be just as disastrous for gay people as Communist rule was. But perhaps with the upheavals in Soviet society, there may be new possibilities for real dialogue to begin. If this happens, and if the gay community in the West continues to support its counterpart in the Soviet Union, then the new generation of Soviet politics may be one in which gay people in the USSR can at last stand in dignity, free from fear.