

Americans react to TV's portrayal of Soviet citizens

By Jackie Barry
and Scott Maben

Of the Emerald

For better or worse, the Soviets have had a rush of publicity on American television in February.

First to mind is ABC's "Amerika," casting patriotically oppressed Americans living under an uncompromising Soviet regime.

Documentaries on the Soviet Union also were broadcast on cable networks last week, some back-to-back with "Amerika," and earlier this month talk-show host Phil Donahue aired four interview segments taped within the Communist bloc.

Are viewers changing their perceptions of Soviet life based on fact or fiction related through media programming?

"That's something we can't answer," said University geography Professor Ron Wixman, referring to "Amerika." Wixman, whose grandparents

were born in Russia, is considered the world's leading ethnologist on the Soviet Union.

"I think most people saw in 'Amerika' something that justifies a position they already have," Wixman said. "(Dramatic) programs do not change people's public opinion."

During the final months of production, "Amerika" was highly rebuked from the left and right, but to the surprise of viewers the 14-and-a-half hour series wound up examining American values of freedom and fellowship more than it spoke of political issues.

Wixman, expecting it would be pro-Cold War propaganda, said he didn't intend to watch the \$35 million-plus "Amerika" but caught parts of it anyway, finding it to be "basically a social commentary on contemporary American values."

"In particular, ('Amerika' insinuates) we take the concept of freedom for granted and that Americans have become so self-centered that they're insensitive to the problems of other Americans," he said.

This analysis of the program is shared by both conservative and liberal acquaintances of his "including Soviet and American specialists on social problems of both countries," he added.

Wixman recalled a scene from "Amerika" in which an American talking with a central Soviet official voices his shock that allies of the United States didn't aid the Americans when the Soviets took over.

"The agent responded, 'You're so foolish. Your allies had a love-hate relationship with you. They loved what you stood for but hated what you did,'" Wixman said.

"If anything, it was not very anti-Soviet," Wixman continued. "I thought it was very toned down from what Soviet oppression is really like."

Others came away from their television sets pondering issues they hadn't considered in the East-West debate.

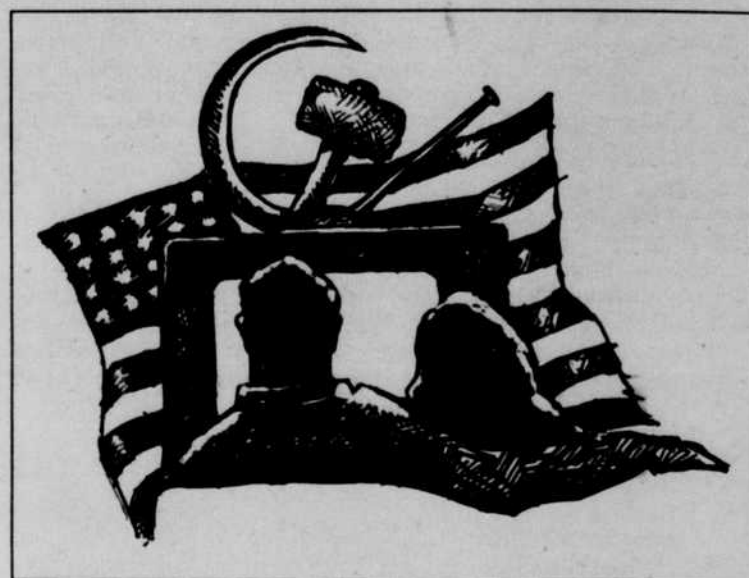
"I thought it did a good job of raising a lot of important questions... questions any thinking American ought to be pretty acutely aware of," said Eugene resident Bob Bennett. "It tried to get people to ask themselves, 'What does being an American mean?'"

Bennett is the former chairman of the Defense Education Committee, an organization "whose purpose is to educate the public about the needs for a national defense posture to deter others from attacking us and protect us in case we are attacked," he said.

Aside from finding it "really dull," Bennett was critical of how writer/director David Wrye downplayed the broken spirits of the people.

"I think the dangers of complacency and apathy weren't perhaps treated forcefully enough. The message was weak in that respect. Not biased or slanted, just weak," complained Bennett, one of four panelists appearing on a half-hour discussion of the miniseries airing on local ABC affiliate KEZI-TV last Friday night.

Two cable networks, WTBS and The Discovery Channel, scheduled alternative programming to "Amerika" last week. WTBS, cable channel 25 in Eugene, aired the Better World Society's "Beyond Fear" series three nights last week. Programming explored the emotions and perceptions of



Graphic by Lorraine Rath

"average" Americans and Soviets in light of the arms race and documented other relevant issues between the two superpowers.

Eric McLamb, the publicity director for the WTBS entertainment division, said the network aired the "Beyond Fear" shows as "another accurate step in television's treatment of prevention of nuclear war. We hope the programs spark better relations between the two superpowers."

WTBS previously has aired programming examining the Western point of view toward U.S.-Soviet relations.

The Atlanta-based network, owned by journalist Ted Turner, would have run the programs even if "Amerika" was never made, but since ABC was running the miniseries, station officials decided last week was the best time to follow up with presenting the Eastern viewpoint, McLamb said.

"Ted was astounded at the audacity of ABC airing 'Amerika.' Basically, he felt it was a vast misrepresentation of Soviet intentions as well as a poor portrayal of the United Nations and of international relations," he said. "So we countered it with programming that is based on fact, not fiction." "Letters from a Deadman" and "Breaking the Spell," two of the "Beyond Fear" productions, will be repeated as a three-hour package on WTBS this Saturday at 4:30 PST.

In addition to the WTBS programming, about nine hours of current Soviet television were broadcast each day last week on The Discovery Channel (cable channel 16 locally).

Cable subscribers were treated to Soviet news, game shows and music videos — a television experiment designed "to present an accurate view of

state-controlled Soviet TV," TDC Chairman John Hendricks was quoted as saying by The Associated Press.

A group of Springfield High School social studies students recently concluded there are plenty of cultural differences between youth in the United States and their counterparts in the Soviet Union, even if the desire for peace is equally strong on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

The students expressed this viewpoint after watching a Phil Donahue show, aired in early February, featuring Soviet teens talking about life as they see it.

Donahue taped remarks from the young Soviet audience during a 10-day visit to the USSR in January. The trip provided material for three more segments of his syndicated talk show.

The class at Springfield High saw two of the four shows recorded by instructor Peter Schull, who said viewing the shows gave his class a chance to study some "current affairs."

Religion and the militia provided the greatest contrasts in opinions, Schull said.

The Soviet students' atheism "kind of set (his class) on their heels," Schull said. Some students are very devout Christians, he said.

"They think (Christianity) is an older thing, something out of the past," observed one of Schull's students.

"I guess they were just brought up that way," said student Stacey Ewing. "Here, there's a lot of things you can believe."

"Church exists for those of weak character," said one of Donahue's teen guests.

But another said she liked the "beautiful old rites" and thought churches should be

Turn to Soviets, Page 9

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