

Children Diplomacy during the late Cold War: Samantha Smith's visit of the 'Evil Empire'

MATTHIAS NEUMANN

(University of East Anglia)

On 25 August 1985, a small Beechcraft 99 commuter plane, operated by Bar Harbor Airlines, carrying six passengers approached its destination Auburn-Lewiston Municipal Airport in the State of Maine. It was a night approach in the summer rain of New England. The plane was coming in too low and was not properly aligned with the airport's instrument landing system. As it touched the tops of the trees, it burst into flames. It crashed just 200 yards from the airport's runway, killing all its passengers and the two pilots.¹ The crash, which investigators from the National Transport Safety Board concluded was primarily caused by pilot error, would in normal circumstances hardly been reported beyond the region of New England. However, the crash of Flight 1808 not only made it into the national news, but was reported all over the world. The reason for the worldwide coverage was the tragic death of the youngest passenger: thirteen year-old school-girl Samantha Smith from Manchester, Maine, who had been accompanied by her father.

Samantha Smith had come to fame by writing a letter to the Soviet leader, Yuri Andropov, in December 1982, expressing her fears about a potential nuclear war between the two superpowers. The letter, which initially was left without response, was eventually published in the main Soviet newspaper *Pravda* in April 1983 and the Smith family was subsequently invited to visit the Soviet Union during the summer. Samantha's trip captured the attention of the world media on both sides of the ideological divide and elevated her into an icon of citizen diplomacy. After her return from the land of the Soviets, Samantha swiftly became a child celebrity in the USA. She covered the 1984 presidential campaign for the Disney Channel in a special programme, interviewing politicians such as George McGovern and Jesse Jackson.

Not surprisingly, her trip to the Soviet Union caused much political controversy in her homeland and was not welcome by the advocates of 'Peace through Strength' that had entered the White House in January 1981. While interest in Samantha's work as an advocate for peace had markedly waned in the US media in 1984, her unexpected death in summer 1985 once again raised her profile. It led to an outpouring of grief amplified by widespread media coverage. In Augusta, the capital of Maine, just a few miles away from her hometown of Manchester more than a thousand people gathered for a memorial service three days after the crash. Yet more remarkable was that Samantha's grieving mother received condolences from the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and President Ronald Reagan. The latter, it must be noted, had never publicly acknowledged her during her lifetime and the ceremony was not attended by representatives of the Reagan administration. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, was keen to make its presence heard. The First Secretary for Cultural Affairs of the Soviet Embassy, Vladimir Kalugin read out Gorbachev's telegram of condolences to the assembled crowd and finished with a personal remark: 'You should know that millions of mothers and fathers and

¹ Press clippings, ID #472338, PA002, WHORM: Subject File, Ronald Reagan Library; Gale Warner 'The Innocent Abroad' in Gale Warner and Michael Shuman (eds.), *Citizen Diplomats: Pathfinders in Soviet-American Relations – and how to join them* (New York, 1987), p. 282.

kids back in Russia share this tragic loss. The best thing would be if we continued what they started with good will, friendship and love. Samantha shone like a brilliant beam of sunshine at a time when relations between our two countries were clouded.’²

By summer 1985, the young school-girl from Maine had already become a cherished children’s star in the Soviet Union. Her tragic death propelled her fame into new spheres. The Soviets began to erect monuments celebrating her life, to name streets, mountains and vessels after her, and they put her smiling face on a postal stamp. Her persona became also inextricably linked with the famous Pioneer camp Artek, a children’s camp she had visited during her trip in summer 1983. At Artek, authorities built a monument to the unique American peace child. Samantha became a symbol of American-Soviet friendship, the public face of citizen diplomacy in the Soviet Union. Every child visiting the camp paid their respect to the young American heroine. By the late 1980s, each child growing up in the Soviet Union would know her name and her charming smile. Indeed, to this day, Samantha Smith remains a name that is widely recognised by ordinary Russians born during the Soviet period and has not left the realm of politics. During his visit to the Artek camp in 2017, quickly reopened after Russia’s annexation of Crimea, President Putin took part in the opening ceremony of a camp session that was dedicated to the life of Samantha Smith.³ While Samantha has all been but forgotten in her homeland, in Russia her legacy still endures.

Samantha Smith’s trip to the Soviet Union and the media sensation it caused in the USA and USSR have usually been dismissed as quirky footnotes in Cold War history. Scholarly interest has only just begun, sparked by the growing research highlighting the significance of cultural and citizen diplomacy during the Cold War. The Soviet Union, it is important to note, emerged as a real pacemaker in the field of cultural diplomacy in the Twentieth century. From the outset, it had received a steady stream of foreign visitors from the West, keen to witness the ‘great experiment’. In its turn, the young socialist state assigned great importance to the Soviet image abroad. While the number of visitors from abroad declined markedly during the later Stalinist period, with the All-Union Society for Cultural Ties Abroad (VOKS) in 1925 and its successor organisation the Union of Soviet Societies of Friendship and Cultural Relations (SSOD) in 1957, the USSR had established powerful agencies to facilitate and coordinate the implementation of the Soviet international cultural mission at home and abroad. Friendship societies, such as the American Society for Cultural Relations with Russia (founded in 1926) or later the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship (founded in 1943) emerged in most Western countries and became central agents of cultural exchange. During the Cold War these networks of friendship organisations were seen by Soviet policy makers as important channels to promote a positive image of the USSR abroad. However, regarding them as mere puppets of Soviet foreign policy ignores the problems VOKS and SSOD faced in managing friendship organisations from afar as well as the independent agency and genuine commitment of the people involved in promoting transnational cooperation in those organisations.⁴

² Warner ‘The Innocent Abroad’, p. 282.

³ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/54865>

⁴ On Soviet cultural diplomacy see: Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy & Western Visitors to the Soviet Union 1921-1941* (Oxford, 2012); Nigel Gould-Davies, ‘The Logic of Soviet Cultural Diplomacy’, *Diplomatic History* 27, 2 (2003), pp. 193-214. On Friendship organisations see: Sonja Großmann, ‘Dealing with “Friends”’: Soviet Friendship Societies in Western Europe as a Challenge for Western Diplomacy’, in Simo Mikkonen and Pia Koivunen (eds.), *Beyond the Divide. Entangled Histories of Cold War Europe* (Oxford 2015), pp. 196-217.

The death of Stalin and the shift to ‘peaceful coexistence’ under Nikita Khrushchev enabled a rapid expansion of cultural relations between the East and the West. The Moscow 1957 Youth Festival as well as the signing of a number of cultural agreements with Western countries, including one with the USA in 1958, signalled a new openness to people at home and abroad. This revival of Soviet cultural diplomacy under Khrushchev has to be understood in the context of the Thaw and his firm belief that the Soviet Union could compete economically with the West. It was an expression of faith in the superiority of the communist system and of his confidence in the USSR’s ability to win the battle for the hearts and minds of foreign audiences. This meant that young people, students or visitors of youth festivals, had a central part to play in the ideological struggle. But as Nigel Gould-Davies had pointed out, ‘the revival of ideological confidence in fact made the Soviet regime more vulnerable to ideological attack.’⁵ Most of the 30,000 young foreign guests of the Moscow Youth Festival left with a positive impression of the Soviet Union, but the Soviet youth was equally, if not more, impressed with the Western popular culture they had encountered.⁶ Cultural diplomacy, the Soviet state was reminded, always entailed risky tradeoffs, Once the genie was out of the bottle, it was difficult to put it back.

Cultural and educational exchange programme as well as the development of tourism facilitated a steady increase of contacts between people from both sides of the divide in the 1960 and 1970s.⁷ However, by the 1980s Soviet cultural diplomacy was less concerned with demonstrating the superiority of Soviet socialism (a battle that few still really believed was winnable), but with the promotion of Soviet initiatives to strengthen world peace. Additionally, beyond the established cultural agreements and central institutions, low-level initiatives by American and Soviet citizens, often in response to the renewed arms race and real fear of nuclear war, facilitated contacts across the divide, a development that was broadly welcome in Moscow. As David Foglesong has recently demonstrated, people-to-people diplomacy saw a real explosion in the late Cold War, producing hundreds of thousands of face-to-face meetings between American and Soviet citizens that challenged negative stereotypes.⁸ Amplified by reporting in national and local media, these encounters were part of a ‘multifaceted and multi-level process that ended American and Soviet enmity.’⁹ This article will demonstrate that Samantha Smith’s trip was a pivotal moment in this broader process because it provided a very public challenge to the strong political discourse of the early Reagan administration which promoted conflict. Similarly, while some of the Soviet government’s intentions and actions related to the trip are still difficult to establish due to archival restrictions, it is possible to assess the significant cultural but also political impacts and legacy of Samantha’s trip within the late USSR. Based on an extensive analysis of Soviet and American media reporting, and using hitherto unused archival evidence, as well as oral history interviews with some of the key

⁵ Gould-Davies, ‘The Logic of Soviet Cultural Diplomacy’, p. 213.

⁶ Pia Koivunen ‘The Moscow 1957 Youth Festival: Propagating a New Peaceful Image of the Soviet Union’. In Melanie Ilic and Jeremy Smith (eds.), *Soviet State and Society under Nikita Khrushchev* (London, 2009), pp. 46-65; idem. ‘Friends, “Potential Friends,” and Enemies: Reimagining Soviet Relations to the First, Second, and Third Worlds at the Moscow 1957 Youth Festival’, in Patryk Babiracki and Austin Jersild (eds.), *Socialist Internationalism in the Cold War: Exploring the Second World* (London, 2017), pp. 219-247.

⁷ On tourism in the Soviet Union, including foreign tourism to the Soviet Union see: V. E. Bagdasaryan et al (eds.) *Sovetskoe zazerkal'e:inostrannyi turizm v SSSR v 1930–1980-e gody* (Moskva, 2007).

⁸ David S. Foglesong, ‘Citizen Diplomacy and the Breaking of Images of the Enemy: How the Cold War Ended in Man Americans’ Hearts and Minds’, unpublished paper presented at the “Overcoming the Cold War: 30th Anniversary of the Meeting between Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan in Moscow”, June 4, 2018, p. 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

protagonists, this article examines why and how Samantha Smith became an icon of citizen diplomacy in the early 1980s. Analysing the receptions, representations, and legacies of her trip on both sides of the ideological divide, it will shed fresh light on the role of children as soft power during the Cold War and highlight Samantha Smith's role as a precursor of a rapidly expanding citizen diplomacy that played a largely ignored part in bringing the conflict to an end.

Children and the Threat of Nuclear War

The early 1980s brought about a marked deterioration in the relationship between the USA and Soviet Union. Having already been dragged into an involvement in the Ethiopian Civil War and interventions in Mozambique and Yemen, the Soviet Union's fateful decision to send troops into Afghanistan, taken in December 1979, all but ended the period of détente. The military intervention that was to last for ten years severely undermined the communist country's longstanding moral claim to be an anti-imperialist power.¹⁰ As Ronald Reagan entered the White House in January 1981, he was able to proudly reassert America's moral superiority in world affairs. For him détente had been a 'one-way street that the Soviet Union has used to pursue its own aims', that is world revolution.¹¹ While domestic and international problems meant Soviet leaders had long stopped talking about overtaking the West with any real conviction, Reagan's virulent anti-communism, highly belligerent rhetoric and commitment to a military buildup posed a clear challenge to Soviet Union's notion of equal superpower status.¹²

In its first press conference, Reagan branded the Soviet Union as a corrupt and immoral regime, ready 'to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat, in order to attain' its aim of a 'one-world Socialist or Communist state'.¹³ It was a state and ideology that had to be defeated as he asserted in May 1982: 'The West won't contain communism, it will transcend communism. It won't bother to dismiss or denounce it, it will dismiss it as some bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages are even now being written.'¹⁴ Two year's later in March 1983, this views had coalesced into the famous labelling of the Soviet Union as an 'evil empire'.¹⁵

The rising tensions between the superpowers and Reagan's confrontational politics on arms control and regional conflicts heightened fears of the threat of nuclear Armageddon across the world. As a result of it, antinuclear activism experienced a real surge in the early 1980s. On the 12th of June 1982, almost a million people gathered at New York's Central Park for a giant disarmament rally, one of the biggest demonstrations in US history. A Gallop poll in autumn 1981 found that 70% of Americans thought that nuclear war was a real possibility and 30% felt

¹⁰ Artemy M. Kalinovsky, 'The Soviet Union and the Global Cold War' in Juliane Fürst, Silvio Pons, and Mark Selden (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Communism, Volume 3: Endgames? Late Communism in Global Perspective, 1968 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2017), p. 88.

¹¹ The President's News Conference, January 29, 1981, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=44101>

¹² Stephen E. Hanson, 'The Brezhnev Era', in Ronald Suny (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Russia, Volume 3: The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 306; Kalinovsky, 'The Soviet Union and the Global Cold War', p. 88.

¹³ The President's News Conference, January 29, 1981, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=44101>

¹⁴ Ronald Reagan, 'Address at Commencement Exercises at the University of Notre Dame', May 17, 1981, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=43825>

¹⁵ Ronald Reagan, 'Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida', March 8, 1983, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=41023>

that chances of it breaking out were ‘good’ or ‘certain’.¹⁶ In Europe, the campaigns for nuclear disarmament experienced an impressive revival too.¹⁷ For some people, demonstrating was not enough and they began to promote people-to-people diplomacy to break an escalating ideological discourse that appeared to lead to war. In 1983, for example, Cynthia Lazaroff, a Princeton University graduate who had taught in Soviet schools, created the US-USSR Youth Exchange Programme, which would allow hundreds of American youngsters to take part in people-to-people tours of the Soviet Union.¹⁸

Children had become innocent weapons in the ideological struggle for moral superiority since the start of the Cold War. The traditional image of the child, a symbol for innocence and victimisation, was complemented by visions of mobilisation of the next generation in the realm of politics. As Margaret Peacock forcefully demonstrated, in the Soviet Union and United States, government, organisations, and individuals alike instrumentalised the image of the child to build or challenge consensus.¹⁹ While adults contested the image of the child in Cold War propaganda, children and adolescents grew up with real anxiety and real fear of nuclear annihilation. Indeed, as amongst the older generation, the end of détente and onset of the Second Cold War raised levels of anxiety to new heights. Psychologists, educators, and parents were increasingly worried about the effects the threat of nuclear war may have on children.

Studies conducted in several countries revealed that children were often encountering the threat alone through the media or peers, without clear guidance from parents or schools. It left many ‘bewildered and perplexed’ and caused a real sense of helplessness amongst them, leading to a ‘profound sense of fear about the future’.²⁰ A survey of 913 11-19 year olds in the San Jose and Los Angeles area in May 1983, for example, revealed that 58% were ‘worried’ or ‘very worried’ about the possibility of nuclear war. More than half of the youngsters that completed the questionnaire felt nuclear war between the two superpowers would occur during their lifetime.²¹ While Bert the Turtle’s civil defence lessons for children of the 1950s to ‘duck and cover’ had become gradually outdated by the late 1970s, nuclear drills in schools still fed the anxieties of American children well into the 1980s.

Soviet children were no less worried. An American study, based on interviews with 293 Soviet children in two Pioneer camps, revealed that they were even more concerned about the horrors of nuclear war than their American peers. Being better informed about the destructive power of nuclear weapons than American children, very few believed a nuclear war could be survived. However, they were more optimistic about the prospect of avoiding war. Indeed, as the authors of the study noted, virtually all the Soviet children had taken part ‘in officially organised peace

¹⁶ David Cortright, *Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 139-140.

¹⁷ James Hinton, ‘Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament’, in Roger Powers et al (eds.), *Protest, Power, and Change: An Encyclopedia of Nonviolent Action from ACT-Up to Women's Suffrage* (New York, 1997), p. 62.

¹⁸ Foglesong, ‘Citizen Diplomacy and the Breaking of Images of the Enemy’, p.5.

¹⁹ Margaret Peacock, *Innocent Weapons: The Soviet and American Politics of Childhood in the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, 2014).

²⁰ William R Beardslee, ‘Children’s and Adolescents’ Perception of the Threat of Nuclear War: Implications of Recent Studies’, in Fred Solomon and Robert Q. Marston (eds.), *The Medical Implications of Nuclear War* (Washington DC, 1986), p. 413.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 418.

education and activities, such as sending letters to the world leaders, designing banners and posters, collecting names for petitions, and taking part in meetings and demonstrations.’²²

Such state-sponsored activities, mostly organised through the communist children’s and youth organisations, were not surprisingly not taking place in the United States. However, petitioning and letter writing campaigns were very common activities of American non-governmental and religious organisations promoting dialogue and peace. Yet peace activism also entered the US education system. In not just some isolated cases, teachers would ask their pupils to write letters to political leaders in order to express their views about world affairs and verbalise their fears. In his address to the nation on strategic arms reduction and nuclear deterrence in November 1982, Ronald Reagan acknowledged this practice: ‘The most upsetting letters I receive are from schoolchildren who write to me as a class assignment. It’s evident they’ve discussed the most nightmarish aspects of a nuclear holocaust in their classrooms. Their letters are often full of terror. Well, this should not be so.’²³ The White House did not only receive such letters from scared American children, but also from children from both political blocks as well as the non-aligned countries throughout Reagan’s time in office.²⁴ Many of those letters were written by children pleading for the right of their generation to have a future. In one example from 1982, Reagan was sent letters from a group of children of the Gamleby Elementary School in Sweden expressing their opposition to war. Asking him questions such as ‘Do you like war?; Do you know what you are doing?; and asserting ‘We think you are stupid if you think you can solve problems with war’, these children revealed where they, and by extensions probably also their teacher and parents, saw as the underlying cause of the current heightened international tensions.²⁵

The Soviet leaders, too, were receiving vast amounts of letters from concerned Soviet citizen and people from across the globe.²⁶ One of the girls from Sweden that wrote to Ronald Reagan explicitly mentioned to him that she had also written to Brezhnev:

I am an ordinary, unimportant girl from Sweden who thinks that war is the worst thing. You there in the cowboy hat who has so much power, do you have to meddle in other countries small fights just because Brezhnev does this (I have written a similar letter to Brezhnev). If you do this the third world war is not far away and with the weapons we have today the world would be destroyed. Think about it ... it is us, children who will inherit this in case the world is destroyed, if it even exists at that point. Think about it Ronald R. I WANT TO LIVE!!!! Why does war exist? Are you never afraid of war?²⁷

When Samantha Smith sat down to write her short letter to the newly appointed Soviet leader, Yuri Andropov, in winter 1982 she was thus not alone. Letter writing of children to the world

²² E Chivian, L. E. Mack, et al, ‘Soviet children and the threat of nuclear war: A preliminary study’, *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 55, 4 (1985), pp. 499-500.

²³ Ronald Reagan, ‘Address to the Nation on Strategic Arms Reduction and Nuclear Deterrence’, November 22, 1982, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=42030>

²⁴ The following casefiles include letters to Ronald Reagan from children from the USA, Sweden, Poland, and Italy: ID #81674, #81675, Box 1, PC; #318140, #375895, #410110, Box 2, PC; #484887, #495118, #508728, Box 3, PC, WHORM: Subject File, Ronald Reagan Library.

²⁵ Letters, Swedish children from the Gamleby Elementary School to Ronald Reagan, May 1982, ID #81674, PC, Box 1, WHORM: Subject File, Ronald Reagan Library.

²⁶ *Pravda*, April 11, 1983, p. 4.

²⁷ Letter, Anna-Carin Rask to Ronald Reagan, May 18, 1982, ID #81674, PC, Box 1, WHORM: Subject File, Ronald Reagan Library. Translated from Swedish.

leaders had clearly become a wider cultural phenomenon of Cold War culture and a way for educators, and at time parents, to allow children to confront and express their fears and hopes of the future.

Samantha's letter

According to her own account, Samantha Smith decided to write her letter to the new Soviet leader Yuri Andropov after seeing his picture on the cover of *Time Magazine* in November 1982. After reading the article together with her mother and discussing the widespread fear of nuclear war in both countries, Samantha suggested to her mother to write Andropov. Her mother replied; 'Why don't you write to him?'²⁸ As her dad, an English professor at the University of Maine, Augusta, had also just assigned his students to write letters to famous people, she felt inspired to do it too.²⁹ Encouraged by her parents she wrote:

Dear Mr. Andropov,

My name is Samantha Smith. I am ten years old. Congratulations on your new job. I have been worrying about Russia and the United States getting into a nuclear war. Are you going to vote to have a war or not? If you aren't please tell me how you are going to help to not have a war. This question you do not have to answer, but I would like to know why you want to conquer the world or at least our country. God made the world for us to live together in peace and not to fight.

Sincerely,

Samantha Smith

The letter was probably all but forgotten, but five months later on the 11 April 1983, it was quoted in *Pravda*, alongside excerpts from several letters of equally concerned American citizens addressed to the Soviet leader.³⁰ The timing of this publication, it should be noted, was no coincidence. It were only weeks since President Reagan had given his 'evil empire' speech and raised the prospect of a return to the arms race by announcing the SDI programme. In his address to the nation on the 23 March, he specifically accused the Soviet Union of having pursued the build-up of weapon arsenals 'that can only be considered an offensive military force.'³¹ Samantha's letter had made a similar accusation about the expansionist ambitions of the communist country: 'why you want to conquer the world'? The publication of it thus allowed *Pravda* to illustrate the propaganda all American children were allegedly subjected to under the belligerent Reagan presidency and it also assigned clear responsibility for the deteriorating relations.

Samantha was pleased that a part of her letter had appeared in *Pravda*. However, having not received a reply from Andropov and seeing most of her question ignored in the article, she wrote another letter, this time to the Soviet Ambassador to the USA. Could she expect a

²⁸ Samantha Smith, *Journey to the Soviet Union* (Boston and Toronto, 1985), pp. 3-4.

²⁹ Associated Press Release, April 25, 1983, Maine State Museum 2010.37.164; 'Pravda Prints Maine Letter, Samantha Waiting for Reply, *Bangor Daily News*, April 12, 1983.

³⁰ *Pravda*, 11 April 1983, p. 4.

³¹ Ronald Reagan, 'Address to the Nation on Defense and National Security', March 23, 1983, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=41093>;

response from Mr Andropov, Samantha asked the highest Soviet representative in her country. It was only this second letter that appears to have put things in motion. On the 26 April 1983, the answer from Andropov arrived. It was simultaneously released by the Soviet press agency, TASS, to maximise the media effect. Samantha was thrilled when she received the reply: she was invited to visit the Soviet Union with her family that summer. The Soviet leader asked her to come and see the peace-loving country of socialism with her own eyes and visit the famous international children's camp, Artek, on Crimea as part of her trip. Andropov wrote that 'the Soviet Union solemnly declared throughout the entire world that never — never — will it use nuclear weapons first against any country. In general we propose to discontinue further production of them and to proceed to the abolition of all the stockpiles on Earth.'³² In doing so, he implicitly attacked the new White Houses rearmament policy.

Media coverage of Samantha's correspondence with Andropov had rapidly accelerated since her letter was first published in *Pravda*. But with Andropov's direct answer to the school girl from Maine and her invitation to visit the Soviet Union, Samantha became overnight a real media star. The press jumped on this unfolding extraordinary fairy-tale penpalship between a ten-year young girl and the old Soviet leader. By the evening of the 26 April, Samantha and her mother Jane, were put on a chartered plane by CBS and NBC, flying her to New York City for several TV appearances. Interviews on national newspapers and appearances on TV shows, such as the popular *Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*, raised her profile across the USA. Samantha proved to be incredibly at ease in front of cameras, being able to look directly into them and handling questions well. This, as Gale Warner has pointed out, who interviewed the Smiths shortly before the crash in April 1985, fostered her 'production values'. Indeed, the executive producer of the *Tonight Show*, sought to secure exclusive rights for the show to accompany the family with a camera team on their forthcoming trip to the land of the Soviets.³³

With the media limelight also came the politics. Samantha was not only rapidly becoming an ambassador for her country, but also a representative of the progressive state of Maine. Senator George J. Mitchell (Dem.) congratulated her for her conduct in the first wave of interviews, showing herself to be an intelligent and poised young girl. A few weeks later the House of Representative and Senate Chamber of the State of Maine signed a joint resolution recognising Samantha for her 'historic correspondence' with the Soviet leader. The resolution declared that Samantha 'a beam of sunlight from Manchester, Maine, has sparked a glimmer of hope in the tense coldness of international relations. (...) [A] 10-year old school girl had succeeded where other have failed in initiating a candid dialogue with the leader of the Soviet Union.'³⁴

From the very early stages of her rapidly increasing fame, Samantha Smith displayed a natural talent when dealing with the media frenzy. She connected well with her audience and everyone that she met. In many respects she encapsulated the beauty and innocence of American childhood. With brunette hair, innocent inviting eyes and a big charming smile, Samantha, the

³² Letter, Yuri V. Andropov to Samantha Smith, April 19, 1983, Maine State Museum 2010.37.133. (Republished in Smith, *Journey to the Soviet Union*, p.8.) Copy of the original letter in Russian, Maine State Museum 2010.37.206.

³³ Letter, Steve Friedman, Executive Producer, TODAY to Mr and Mrs Smith, May 2, 1983, Maine State Museum 2010.37.135; Warner 'The Innocent Abroad', p. 286.

³⁴ Letter, Senator George J. Mitchell to Samantha Smith, April 27, 1983, Maine State Museum 2010.37.135; further congratulatory letters by members of the US Congress and Senate Democratic Leadership, see Maine State Museum 2010.37.136; Joint Resolution of the Senate Chamber and House of Representatives of the State of Maine, May 10, 1983, Maine State Museum 2010.37.150.

softball playing child from Manchester, who liked Michael Jackson and had a Chesapeake Bay retriever as her best friend, conformed to popular images of the cute American sweetheart. Journalists from *The Daily Free Press*, who interviewed Samantha after her trip, professed in a letter to her father that they ‘were enchanted with Samantha’.³⁵

Samantha had this effect on many people she encountered. The way she resonated with the American and international audience stirred up the media coverage, which in turn meant the Smiths were already receiving hundreds of letters from fellow Americans before they embarked on their trip to the USSR. These letters highlighted the serious political nature of the unfolding events to the parents. In particular, Soviet Jewish emigres in Europe, Israel and the United States beseeched the family to take emigration request letters with them to the USSR and hand them over to Andropov. Many of the letter writers also wanted Samantha to use her trip to publically make a statement about human rights, and the lack thereof in the Soviet Union. The question of Soviet Jewish emigration was one of major concern in the international Jewish community and the White House was bombarded with petitions to pursue the issue. In the end the Smiths decided to take those letters with them and deliver them in good faith to a Soviet official, but they did not want to talk about them publicly.³⁶

The Smiths unexpected encounter with the politics of Jewish emigration highlighted that the initiative to invite an American schoolgirl to visit the USSR was not without risks for the Soviet government. The trip clearly offered great potential to be used in the propaganda war between the two ideological adversaries, but involving a child and an army of international media outlets following her every step, meant there were obvious dangers for the trip to backfire. Once the Smiths accepted the invitation, it thus forced the American and Soviet government alike, to prepare as best as they could for the inevitable media circus accompanying her visit.

Visiting the Soviet Lands

As the publication of Andropov’s response hit the media outlet across the world, inside the Soviet Union several organisations began to work towards putting a programme together in case – and this was by no means clear when the letter was published by TASS – the Smiths were to accept the invitation. Natasha Semenikhina (now Batova), who was working for the USA-USSR section of the Union of Soviet Societies of Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (SSOD), recalled how things quickly snowballed as numerous organisations and institutions made proposals for the potential itinerary.³⁷ One important part of the trip had been already announced in Andropov’s letter – a visit of the famous Pioneer camp, Artek, on Crimea. The detailed organisation of those days was left to the camp authorities, who were used to welcoming many Soviet and foreign dignitaries and children from across the world. Through the embassy in Washington DC, members of SSOD in charge of preparing the trip secured more information about the family and the young girl. In the end the itinerary put

³⁵ Letter, Brian Caseneuve to Mr Smith, undated, Maine State Museum 2010.37.137.1-2.

³⁶ Smith, Jane. Interview by Matthias Neumann. Norwich, UK – Manchester, Maine USA, July 12, 2017. Warner ‘The Innocent Abroad’, p. 298; The case files in PO165 in the Ronald Reagan Library are full of letters and petitions related to the issue of Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union. For example a letter by two Soviet Jewish children asking the Ronald Reagan to help their families to emigrate to Israel: ID #178918, PO165, Box 191 WHORM: Subject File, Ronald Reagan Library.

³⁷ Batova (Semenikhina), Natasha. Interview by Matthias Neumann. Washington, D.C., USA, March 29, 2018.

together for the Smiths two-week trip was a classic tour of the main historical and cultural Russian sights in Moscow and Leningrad. A meeting with Andropov himself was discussed, and his office was keen for it to be arranged if the health of the frail leader allowed it.³⁸

Whereas the preparations for the upcoming trip of the Smith family kicked off immediately with the publication of Andropov's response, the White House appeared, as with the original publication in *Pravda*, to have been taken by surprise by the developments amid the ensuing media circus. Not wanting to grace what they clearly saw as a Soviet propaganda ploy with any official response, the White House remained silent. Andropov's letter had put them on the defensive. As a result, the White House continued to be reactive rather than trying to actively shape events and the emerging narrative. That said, the Russian desk at the State Department sent a representative to Maine to speak to Samantha's parents after they had accepted the invitation. Samantha's mother, Jane Smith, remembered this encounter in very positive terms. They had lots of questions for the man from Washington. They were, of course, aware of the political dimension of their endeavour and were keen to get advice on how to behave in public situations in the Soviet Union. One main concern was, Jane recalled, how to react if the Soviet side asked them to do something they did not feel comfortable about. They felt reassured by the State Department representative's answer that they would not anticipate the Soviet authorities to put them in difficult situations.³⁹ The risk for the Soviet side for this trip to backfire, was clearly obvious to him. In the end, Jane Smith asserted in an interview, he was right on this point. Apart from one situation, where Samantha was approached by a group of people to sign a petition against Reagan, that was quickly dealt with by intervention of their Soviet chaperone, Natasha Semenikhina, the trip went without any complications according to Jane Smith's recollections.⁴⁰

The Smiths landed at Sheremetyevo airport on the 8th of July 1983 on an Aeroflot flight from Montreal. Greeting them at the airport were their two guides for the trip, Gennady Fedosov and Natasha Semenikhina (Batova), a large crowd of excited journalists from across the world, keen to capture the moment of the arrival of the young goodwill ambassador, and representatives of a number of Soviet organisations. A brief press conference was arranged before they were rushed off to the famous Hotel Sovetskaya, a clear indication of their 'red carpet' treatment. This girl was the guest of the Soviet leader after all. It promised to become a fairy-tale story that was eagerly followed by the more than 30 accredited journalists from the host nation, the Eastern bloc, as well as from the other side of the iron curtain – the USA, Britain, France and West Germany.⁴¹ In Moscow the family visited the Lenin Mausoleum, the Kremlin, the Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy (VDNKh), a Pioneer Palace and Samantha had an audience with the first women in space, Valentina Tereshkova. In Leningrad, towards the end of the fourteen day trip, she visited the key places of the Russian Revolution and the Piskaryovskoye Memorial Cemetery, dedicated to the victims of the 900-day siege of Leningrad during World War II, and the Kirov Ballet (the Bolshoi in Moscow was closed for repairs).⁴² Each of the days of the trip began with a press conference. The central

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Smith, Jane. Interview by Matthias Neumann; Warner 'The Innocent Abroad', p. 296.

⁴⁰ Smith, Jane. Interview by Matthias Neumann. It should be noted that Natasha Batova had no recollection of this incident. Batova, Natasha. Interview by Matthias Neumann.

⁴¹ Ariadna Nikolenko, 'Samantha Smith: "Yes, I have Got the Answer to my Question"', *Soviet Life*, November 1983, p. 41.

⁴² Ibid.

part of the trip, the real outstanding experience in the media coverage in the Eastern and Western bloc, however, became her trip to the famous Pioneer camp, Artek, on Crimea.

Children's Republic versus Communist Bootcamp – at Artek

The Pioneer Camp Artek officially opened its doors to the first children on 16 June 1925, when the red flag rose over its main square on a sunny day. Initially, the primary purpose of the camp was to provide children suffering from poor health with a place to recover. However, the purpose of the camp changed swiftly. Within a few years it was no longer filled with sickly children, but a visit to the camp became a reward for the best young pioneers in the country and, not surprisingly, the offspring of the growing Soviet elite. During the Cold War it also began to host an international session each summer, presenting 'itself as a flagship of international cooperation'.⁴³ Artek's motto was 'Peace and Friendship'

The decision to turn Artek into an international youth camp once a year must be seen in the context of Khrushchev's drive to relaunch the socialist project in the 1950s, after he had denounced the aberrations of Stalinism. The new Soviet leader, filled with genuine optimism and belief in the superiority of the Soviet system, started an architectural competition for the further expansion of the camp. The growing capacity of the camp allowed it to welcome about 5,000 children from over 60 countries for up to a month each summer. Their visits started to be organised in a much more structured and thoroughly planned-through way. Artek became a prime Socialist space, showcasing the Soviet system to the world. Through a structured regime of mental and physical activities, alongside interaction with a population of young Soviets, children from across the world were supposed to undergo a transformation into peace activists sympathetic to the Soviet world view. An official document stated that after a stay of at least 15-20 days, foreign children would start to reevaluate their views of ongoing events in the world and understand the correctness of Soviet foreign policy: a 'policy of peace and friendship between all countries, races and nationalities.'⁴⁴ In the Cold War propaganda war between East and West, Artek became a primary arena for the Soviet Union to project the image of children as peace activists.⁴⁵ In essence, the international camp was supposed to change perceptions of the Soviet Union amongst the visitors from abroad, to expose them to Soviet education, if only briefly, to make sure the activities and excursions would imprint a positive impression about Soviet life and living standards that the children would take home, and to present the Soviet Union as a peace-loving multi-ethnic nation.

Samantha Smith was not the first American child to visit Artek. Delegations of American children had attended the international session from the late 1960s. However, their visits had largely been unnoticed in the Western media. The Artek Pioneer Camp was a truly magical place. Located in a beautiful area of the Crimean Peninsula, nestled on the banks of the Black Sea between high rising cliffs, it clearly mesmerised its young visitors from the Soviet Union and abroad. One former American Arteker, who visited it the summer before Samantha Smith, vividly captured the dream-like nature of the surreal environment. Marching into the camp, Tracey Broadhead, a young black girl from Oakland, remembered, 'almost felt like going into Willy Wonka's Chocolate factory ... walking into this world where there is colour and

⁴³ Peacock, *Innocent Weapons*, p. 102.

⁴⁴ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (hereafter *RGASPI*), f.M2, op. 2, d. 195, l. 6.

⁴⁵ Peacock, *Innocent Weapons*, p. 102.

vibrancy, ... uniforms and these beautiful flowers, trees, and ocean, crushing waves on the shores. I was really happy.’⁴⁶

Artek was a place with its own rule and structures. As the showcase Pioneer camp of the Soviet Union, the camp’s authorities had a wealth of experience in organising visits of Soviet dignitaries and their offspring as well as of international guests. It was therefore largely left to them to organise the detailed schedule for Samantha’s time in the camp.⁴⁷ However, the visit of a young girl from America, a personal guest of the General Secretary, accompanied by a huge international media entourage was certainly not the norm. When Samantha arrived at the camp in July 1983, it was several weeks before the annual international session. The camp was full of children from across the Soviet Union, who had discussed Samantha’s correspondence with Andropov during the regular political discussion.⁴⁸ There was real excitement in the camp about her visit. Most of the children had never met an American.⁴⁹

When Samantha arrived at Simferopol airport she was greeted a group of excited Pioneers, who joined her on the bus journey to Artek. At the camp thousands of Pioneers in their uniforms had assembled for a ceremony holding up welcoming banners in English. Music was played, welcome songs rung out, and the Pioneers began to chant her name. Samantha was presented with a loaf of bread and a bowl of salt, an old Russian tradition to welcome honoured guests. The media entourage, whose bus had arrived late from the airport, eagerly captured those moments.⁵⁰

Samantha was invited to stay in the camp during her time at Artek and join a group of selected Pioneers, some of whom spoke English, in their dorm. She accepted. Her parents agreed to this under the condition that she would not be followed at every step by journalists, but only on special occasions.⁵¹ Natasha Kasherina, a thirteen year-old girl from Leningrad, who spoke a little bit of English (her mum was a language teacher) was selected to stay with Samantha and befriend her. The camp director assigned Olga Volkova, a young Artek counsellor, to become Samantha’s and Natasha’s personal Pioneer leader for the duration of her stay.⁵²

The Artek stay of Samantha captured the attention of the Soviet and American audience alike, causing very different reactions. In the Soviet sphere, the so-called ‘Children’s Republic’ naturally represented an embodiment of the promised communist society and a microcosm of a better, more peaceful and more cheerful world. Even for many Soviet citizens who had turned into apathetic conformists in the 1980s, the existence of hundreds of children summer camps stood as visible manifestations of the state’s vast investment into education and its care for future generations. Artek, as the showcase camp, assumed special symbolism in the collective memory of Soviet childhood. And it was thus at Artek that the Soviet public began to embrace Samantha as one of their own.

Conversely, many Americans were looking with unease at images of all those children in Artek Pioneer uniforms and a young American girl amongst them wearing one too. *The Boston Globe*

⁴⁶ Broadhead-Frith, Tracey. Interview by Matthias Neumann, Oakland, Ca, USA, September 20, 2016.

⁴⁷ Batova, Natasha. Interview by Matthias Neumann.

⁴⁸ Volkova, Olga. Interview by Matthias Neumann. Tallinn, Estonia, January 21, 2018.

⁴⁹ Natasha Kashirina Rosston ‘Natasha Kashirina Remembers’, Samantha Smith Foundation, <http://www.samanthasmith.info/index.php/2-uncategorised/140-natasha-kashirina-remembers>

⁵⁰ Smith, *Journey to the Soviet Union*, pp. 34-40; Volkova, Olga. Interview by Matthias Neumann.

⁵¹ Volkova, Olga. Interview by Matthias Neumann.

⁵² Ibid.

called Artek ‘a symbol of Soviet socialist hypocrisy’, claiming that it was exclusive to children from the Soviet elite, something that was simply not the case.⁵³ The CBS correspondent reporting on the trip tried to counter the images of happy children swimming in the Black Sea, by showing footage of a Soviet film that showed Young Pioneers in paramilitary training and drill. The editorial message, as Gayle Warner remarked, was that ‘under Artek’s smiling and sunny surface lurks a Communist boot camp’.⁵⁴

The conservative leaning media in the US was not surprisingly even less impressed. On the 18th of July, just days after Samantha had left Artek, the *U.S. News and World Report* published an article attacking her trip with the headline ‘Samantha Smith: Pawn in Propaganda War’.⁵⁵ Irrespective of the political leanings of newspapers, editors were receiving numerous letters from their readers highlighting the divisive assessment of Samantha’s endeavour. *The Los Angeles Times*, for example, printed six letters on the 25th of July 1983.⁵⁶ Three of the letter writers characterised her as a dupe of Soviet propaganda. Their sharp, aggressive and at times sarcastic criticism raised the human rights record of the Soviet regime, the issue of Jewish emigration, imprisonment of dissidents in psychiatric hospitals, and the human costs of war in Afghanistan. The other three letters, however, less detailed and much shorter, emphasised her role in breaking the discourse of conflict. Matthew Stern from Reseda asserted that ‘[a]mid the rhetoric of military strategy and political ideology, Samantha Smith has shown us that the Russian are not less human or different as we are. In turn, she has shown her host country the human side of our country.’⁵⁷

The Soviets were obviously well aware of the fact that the trip would be reported as a propaganda stunt in certain parts of the American media landscape and be seen as such by many Americans. It is interesting in this context, how that particular attention was assigned by the press and some of the Soviet actors themselves to the question of how Samantha Smith ended up wearing an Artek Pioneer uniform. On the one hand, these images were extremely valuable for the emerging Soviet narrative of the young American girl that embraced her host nations customs and culture. On the other hand, the Soviets were obviously keen to avoid feeding the Western critical discourse that stressed the exploitation of the innocent and naïve girl from Maine for Soviet propaganda.

In her own book recollecting the events, Samantha simply said her Pioneer leader, Olga Volkova, and the Soviet girls dressed her in an Artek Pioneer uniform on the first morning, but she only wore a visitor scarf because she was not a regular member. Olga Volkova, however, emphasised in an interview that it was Samantha who asked for the full uniform *and* the scarf, but was told she could not have the latter. Indeed, she stressed she had to go through all kinds of trouble organising an uniform for her. A third version appeared in the US media. According to an article published after her death, it was Jane Smith who had advised her daughter to refuse wearing the scarf, ‘something her mother called “a symbol of devotion to the Communist

⁵³ Warner ‘The Innocent Abroad’, p. 299. While children of the Soviet elite were certainly well-represented, the vast majority of children ended up at Artek based on merit or talent, i.e. they were good pupils and Pioneers and/or were talented singers, dancers, and athletes.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ ‘Samantha Smith: Pawn in Propaganda War’, *U.S. News and World Report*, July 18, 1983.

⁵⁶ ‘Letters to the Times’, *The Los Angeles Times*, July 25, 1983, p. 4.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Party.”⁵⁸ These conflicting stories highlighted the sensitive nature of this issues for both sides. Samantha parents as well as the Soviet authorities had a shared interest to avoid feeding an anti-Soviet narrative that suggested the young girl was being exploited for political ends. Whoever took the initiative in this context, Samantha ended up wearing the Artek Pioneer uniform. The moment she received the blue-and-white visitor scarf from Olga was captured by Soviet photographers.⁵⁹



Figure 1: U.S. girl Samantha Smith in Artek. RIA Novosti archive, image #793152 / Yuri Abramochkin / CC-BY-SA 3.0

The narrative in the US media naturally remained contested, with negative and positive stories about the young cultural ambassador’s trip being published throughout summer 1983. Yet, in the Soviet Union the images of the giggly, smiling American girl having lots of fun with her Soviet peers at Artek provided the press with visual evidence to produce a coherent narrative of a young American girl who enthusiastically embraced her host country and became convinced that ‘Russians, like Americans, do not want war’.⁶⁰ This was perhaps best encapsulated in the highly symbolic Artek tradition of taking children out on a boat to the neutral waters of the Black Sea to float a bottle with messages from the young peace activists. Samantha, Natasha and other Soviet Pioneers went out together and threw a bottle into the sea.

⁵⁸ Tony DePaul, ‘Samantha Smith’s Letter put her in a Tug-of-War: She was called a Dupe – and an Inspiration’, *Bangor Daily News*, August 27, 1985.

⁵⁹ Smith, *Journey to the Soviet Union*, p. 50.

⁶⁰ Caption accompanying a picture of Samantha Smith wearing a traditional *kokoshnik*, *Soviet Life*, November 1983.

Samantha, it was reported, wrote ‘Peace for life’, her friend Natasha ‘I don’t want war, I want to study and live in peace’.⁶¹ The children’s newspaper, *Pionerskaya Pravda*, closely covered the trip for the young Soviet audience and adopted Samantha as one of their own. By the time Samantha’s trip came to an end, the paper had received letters and drawings from many children addressed to Samantha. They were handed to her as a farewell gift.⁶² Samantha rapidly became an icon of Soviet-American friendship for the Pioneer organisations – the friendly face of the ideological adversary.

While a special relationship was clearly developing between Soviet children and the image of Samantha Smith as a Goodwill Ambassador of Peace, it is important to note that she also resonated with the wider Soviet public. In contrast to the clearly ideologically-charged pictures of Samantha amongst Pioneers in the Artek pioneer uniform, images of this innocent and beautiful American girl visiting a Russian circus or theatre, getting dressed in a traditional Russian costume of *silk sarafan* and a *kokoshnik* (Figure 2), showed a friendly visitor openly and enthusiastically embracing the culture of her host. This, not surprisingly, appealed to the strongly developed public sense of cultural pride, enchanted a much broader audience and allowed Samantha to be taken into its collective heart. In the end, it may have been an advantageous that the meeting with Andropov never took place due to his ill health. It meant that her visit was not fully appropriated and overshadowed by high politics. Samantha became an American-Soviet sweetheart – the good face of America.

⁶¹ Nikolenko, ‘Samantha Smith: “Yes, I have Got the Answer to my Question”’, *Soviet Life*, November 1983, p. 41.

⁶² *Ibid.*

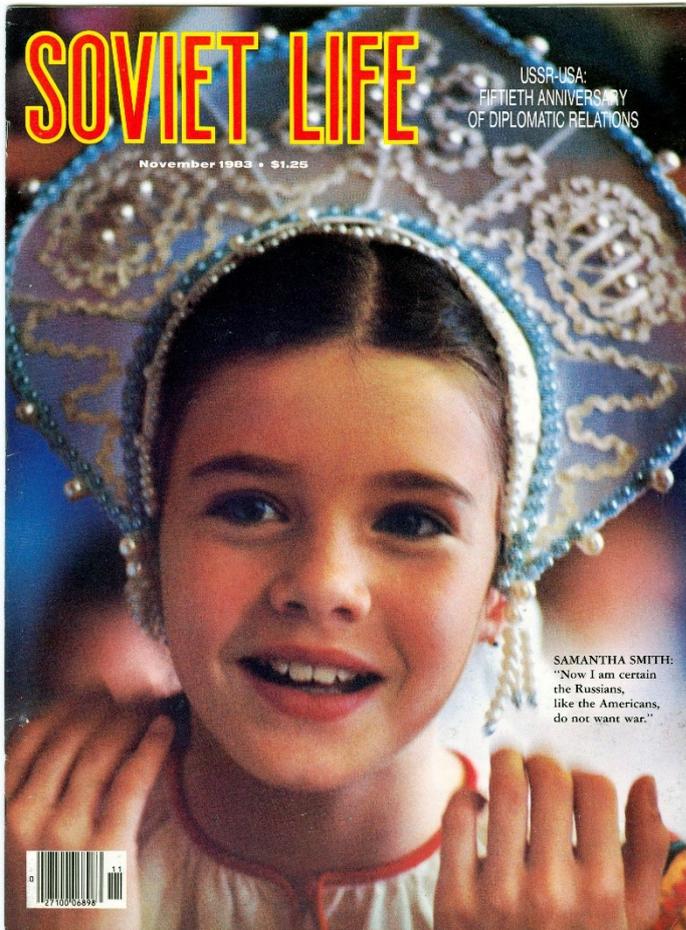


Figure 2: Cover of *Soviet Life*, November 1983. Maine State Museum 2010.37.104.4

‘From Russia to Hollywood’– Reclaiming the American Sweetheart

On her way back to the United States, Samantha stopped over in Newfoundland, Montreal and Boston, welcomed every time by camera crews and journalist. Back in Maine, she received a ‘heroine’s welcome with a red carpet, roses and a limousine ride to her house’.⁶³ TV appearances on all three major networks were lined up and letters from all over the country were piling up. About 6,000 arrived in the two years following her trip, from children throughout the world and Soviet children in particular.⁶⁴ Many letter were also from American teachers who asked her to share her experience with their classes.⁶⁵ Letters by people inspired by Samantha Smith’s goodwill mission also began to arrive at the White House. For example, Nancy L. Johnson, a Republican Congress Woman, forwarded a letter by one of her constituents during Samantha’s trip, enquiring whether President Reagan would invite a Russian girl to the US. Samantha. The author of the letter concluded, ‘Samantha might be the start of something tremendous. How tragic if we should lose the thread that could have been built into a bridge’.⁶⁶ The White House rejected such ideas by emphasising the propagandistic

⁶³ ‘From Russia Back to ‘Regular Things’, *New York Times*, July 23, 1983, p. 5.

⁶⁴ Warner ‘The Innocent Abroad’, p. 302.

⁶⁵ ‘Samantha: “There’s no place like Home” as 2-week trip ends’, *Boston Globe*, July 23, 1983.

⁶⁶ Letter, Morton P. Matthews to Nancy L. Johnson (forwarded to the White House), July, 11, 1983, ID #154386, PO165, Box 191 WHORM: Subject File, Ronald Reagan Library.

nature of the Smith's trip. Before one would be able to consider 'initiating highly publicised people-to-people exchanges with the Soviets, we must have evidence that the Soviet Union is attempting to honour its Helsinki pledges as they apply to all Soviet citizens, and not just in exceptional cases for with they reap propaganda benefit.'⁶⁷ In November 1983, Ronald Reagan himself expressed this view in an answer to a letter that had raised the exceptional story of Samantha Smith:

Most people – I believe – saw this as a simply a propaganda ploy. Of course, there is no question that the people behind the Iron Curtain want peace. And nobody wants nuclear war. But the people in those countries have no say in what the government does. The Soviet Union is a hostile, predatory empire. It keeps trying to expand – by direct use of its own troops as in Afghanistan, or indirectly through puppets like Fidel Castro.⁶⁸

The White House clearly tried its best to avoid commenting in public on Samantha's trip as it was challenging the strong 'evil empire' rhetoric. The destruction of the Korean Airliner KAL007 by the Soviets on the 1st of September 1983, killing 269 people, had heightened tensions between the superpowers just weeks after Samantha's return. The incident reaffirmed Reagan's tough stance on the Soviet Union. Indeed, many journalists approached the Smiths asking for Samantha reaction on the massacre. 'We all were really upset, and didn't understand how that could possibly happen,' her father stated. 'Many people don't realise that an 11-year-old doesn't sit around and discuss politics.'⁶⁹ While this event clearly put a shadow over the achievement of the trip, Samantha's popularity did not wane quickly and she continued to receive media exposure in her role as a child ambassador of peace. In December 1983, she left on a 10-day tour to Japan meeting the Prime Minister as well as giving a speech at the Children's International Symposium for the 21st Century in Japan. The 'Angel of Peace', as she was called by the Japanese press, promoted the fostering of international friendships across the divide through an 'international granddaughter exchange'.⁷⁰ 'A president wouldn't want to send a bomb to a country his granddaughter was visiting.'⁷¹ While this rather unrealistic proposals revealed her young age and found little attention, Samantha remained in the eyes of the media.

In 1984 she assumed the role as a political pundit. The Disney Channel contracted her for a programme entitled 'Samantha Smith Goes to Washington – campaign '84' to cover the upcoming election campaign. She interviewed several Democratic candidates asking them questions on worldwide nuclear freeze, equal rights and children's rights.⁷² In 1985 she also published her book 'Journey to the Soviet Union' in which she described her trip. The continuing media coverage of her engagement in political matters was not surprisingly also receiving critical comments. In an article entitled 'Out of the mouths of babes: The Making of

⁶⁷ Letter, Alvin Paul Drischler, Acting Assistant Secretary Legislative and Intergovernmental Affairs, to Nancy L. Johnson, ID #154386, PO165, WHORM: Subject File, Ronald Reagan Library.

⁶⁸ Letter, Ronald Reagan to Dale A. Garcia, November 1, 1983, ID #183454, PO165, WHORM: Subject File, Ronald Reagan Library.

⁶⁹ Associated Press article, 'Samantha Smith Reacts to Jet Hit', *Beaver County Times*, September 7, 1983.

⁷⁰ Press Clippings, Maine State Museum 2010.37.134; *Time Magazine*, January 9, 1984.

⁷¹ 'Samanthas Proposes Exchange of Granddaughters at Conference', *The Lewiston (Maine) Daily Sun*, December 27, 1983.

⁷² 'Samantha Smith Interviews Presidential Candidates', *The Lewiston Journal*, February 18, 1984; 'Samantha Smith', *Disney Channel Magazine*, February 1984.

Samantha Smith', Susan Stobaugh attacked the coverage of her trip to the Soviet Union and the subsequent rise to fame. 'Smith's story is a parable of modern American life? What is her great talent, after all – aggrandizing publicity?' Referencing Andy Warhol's notion of everyone's '15 minutes of fame', the author stated: 'This child is attractive, and maybe even intelligent. But she is still a child. There is something wrong with adults who think any child has a contribution to make to complex issues of foreign relations. And there is also something wrong with the mutual exploitation that's been going on.'⁷³ While such harsh media criticism was relatively uncommon, Stobaugh article pointed to a change in the image of Samantha in the American public. Her letter to Andropov and her trip to the Soviet Union in summer 1983 remained a point of reference in all media coverage, but Samantha was increasingly being seen primarily as an American child TV celebrity.⁷⁴ A small role in the TV sitcom *Charles in Charge* in 1984, eventually led to a major role in the ABC TV series *Lime Street* in spring 1985. The press eagerly followed her journey 'from Russia to Hollywood'.⁷⁵ In many respect, Samantha had been successfully reclaimed as the atypical softball-playing American Sweetheart. Four days later, returning from filming the fourth episode of *Lime Street*, her life came to a tragic end.

'Death of an American Sweetheart'

The death of the young diplomat, turned political pundit, turned actress caused a huge media response and numerous feature stories in the glossy weekly over the next few months.⁷⁶ The Maine newspaper Bangor Daily News attested 'Nation grieves for Samantha Smith' on 27th of August.⁷⁷ Her funeral was attended by more than 1,000 mourners, including the Soviet envoy, Vladimir Kulagin, and her co-star of *Lime Street*, Robert Wagner.⁷⁸ Indeed, her death even forced the White House to acknowledge her life and activism. President Reagan sent condolences to Samantha's mother stating: 'Perhaps you can take some measure of comfort in the knowledge that millions of Americans, indeed millions of people, share the burdens of your grief. They also will cherish and remember Samantha, her smile, her idealism and unaffected sweetness of spirit.'⁷⁹

The White House also received letters on the matter. In one, dated 27th August from a citizen from Niskayana, NY, it was suggested for President Reagan to meet Samantha's mourning mother together with General Secretary Gorbachev with the hope 'that it would provide a catalyst which might initiate political breakthroughs that lead our world on a new peaceful trajectory.' The proposal was, not surprisingly not accepted, but it was pointed out in the

⁷³ Susan Stobaugh, 'Out of the Mouths of Babes: The Making of Samantha Smith', *The Boston Phoenix*, March 12, 1985.

⁷⁴ *Time Magazine*, 11 March 1985; Karen Harrison, 'Samantha Smith: Meet the Young Ambassador of American Goodwill', *Barbie Magazine*, Spring 1985; *People Magazine*, June 3, 1985, 79-81.

⁷⁵ 'From Russia to Hollywood', Headline of an undated and unidentified newspaper article published in 1985. <http://www.samanthasmith.info>

⁷⁶ *People Magazine*, September 9, 1985; *Picture Week*, September 30, 1985; *People Weekly*, November 11, 1985.

⁷⁷ 'Nation grieves for Samantha Smith', *Bangor Daily News*, August 27, 1985.

⁷⁸ *Bangor Daily News*, August 29, 1985.

⁷⁹ Condolences, Ronald Reagan to Jane Smith, Samantha Smith Foundation, <http://www.samanthasmith.info/index.php/history/history>.

response that a summit with Gorbachev was scheduled for November.⁸⁰ Senator William S. Cohen (Rep) wrote to the White House to highlight that one of his constituent had called to express his anger at the lack of representation of the White House at the memorial service. The White House kept its official line on the case and stated that ‘the issue of sending a delegate was never raised or discussed, as Ms. Smith, was a private citizen and not a representative of the U.S. government.’ The personal message conveyed by President Reagan to her mother grieving mother was seen as entirely sufficient.⁸¹

Her extraordinary penpalship with Andropov and advocacy for peace inevitable became once again widely discussed in the national and international media as a result of the tragedy. It also meant the debate about whether the Smiths had been dupes of the Soviet propaganda machine was revived. The British *Daily Mail* prophesied in a headline ‘Her name and her manipulation will become a quirky footnote to history after the air crash.’⁸² *The Miami News* acknowledged that ‘the American media had (...) made her bigger than life’ and that she had become a ‘symbol’ for peace activists in the country and had ‘inspired thousands (maybe millions) of young people around the world to speak up’. However, it also asserted that many people did not like what she stood for and that her image had changed by the time of her death: ‘Samantha Smith, peace activist, gradually went the way of the freeze movement: obscurity.’⁸³ The debate over the politics of her life continued to be waged in the daily newspapers and ‘acerbic letters to the editors.’⁸⁴ However, her young death appeared to have emboldened those stressing the positive legacy she left behind. *The Los Angeles Times*, which had published very critical assessments from readers after her trip to the Soviet Union, reproduced only favourable letters under the headline ‘Samantha Smith’s Dream for World Peace’ on 7th of September 1985. Several letter writers proposed the creation of children’s and youth exchange programmes in her name. As Robert J. Lathers from Studio City put it, ‘[t]hese little goodwill ambassadors might be the vital ingredient necessary to convince the world leaders and populations of the lunacy of war.’⁸⁵ The support for people-to-people diplomacy was clearly increasing in the mid-1980s.

⁸⁰ Letter, Woolson W. Doane to Ronald Reagan, August 27, 1985, ID #345381, PO165, WHORM: Subject File, Ronald Reagan Library.

Reagan Library CO165 345381

⁸¹ Letter, Senator William S. Cohen to The White House, September 4, 1985; Letter, M.B. Oglesby Assistant to the President to Senator William S. Cohen, October 2, 1985, ID #328562, PA002, WHORM: Subject File, Ronald Reagan Library.

⁸² ‘The Short Life and Fame of Samantha Smith: Her name and her manipulation will become a quirky footnote to history after the air crash’, *Daily Mail*, August 27, 1985; DePaul, ‘Samantha Smith’s Letter’, *Bangor Daily News*, August 27, 1985.

⁸³ ‘Samantha Smith, Precocious Peace Activist’, *The Miami News*, August 29, 1985.

⁸⁴ DePaul, ‘Samantha Smith’s Letter’, *Bangor Daily News*, August 27, 1985.

⁸⁵ ‘Letters’, *The Los Angeles Times*, September 7, 1985, p. 2.

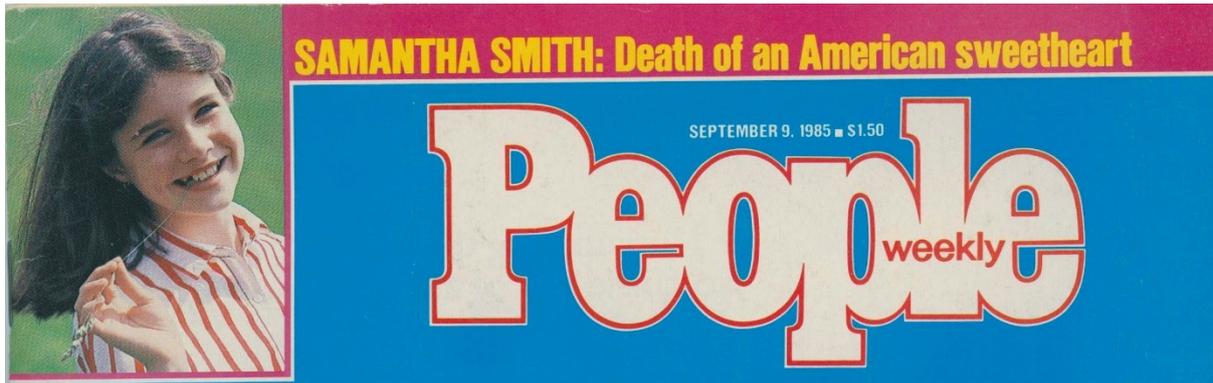


Figure 3: People Weekly, September 9, 1985. Maine State Museum 2010.37.129

In clear contrast to the much more political reporting in national newspapers, the weekly magazines focussed much more on her pure and quintessentially Americanness. *People* magazine, for instance, put a small picture of her on the cover of its next edition with the headline ‘Samantha Smith: Death of an American Sweetheart’.⁸⁶ The magazine cited a neighbour who said that the Smiths were ‘the kind of family America is all about.’ The authors emphasised ‘she was just a regular American girl, and that made her special (...) She was a Girl Scout (Jane led the troop). She was an admittedly “average” fifth-grade student whose idea of delectable eating was Fruit-Roll-Ups and whose notion of a good time was a sleepover with girlfriends. Her favourite TV show, appropriately, was *Fame*, for fame is what she had thrust upon herself when she chanced to write to Andropov.’ Americas littlest ambassador, had induced ‘the American public to take her in her heart.’⁸⁷

The close media coverage continued for the rest of the year. Her mother, Jane Smith, whose life had unquestionably been upturned by the tragic death of her daughter and husband, was determined keep the memory of her daughter alive. Within days of her death the idea of a Samantha Smith Foundation was born. It was set up in October 1985 to ‘promote on a person-to-person basis and the dream for a new international climate.’⁸⁸ With the story still very much in the eye of the media, Jane Smith embarked on numerous public appearances in autumn and winter 1985/86. She appeared on the major network shows, for example ‘The Larry King Show’, and articles on her work for the foundation appeared in the major national newspapers. On 12 November, Senator George Mitchell (Dem) and Senator William S. Cohen (Rep) sponsored a joint bill ‘to provide for a Samantha Smith Memorial Exchange Program to promote youth exchanges between the United States and the Soviet Union.’⁸⁹ Less than a month later the Moscow-Minnesota Spacebridge television programme, staged the ‘Peace Child’ musical simultaneously via two-way satellite links spanning 9 time zones. The musical promoted the role of youth as activist of world peace and the event was dedicated to the memory of Samantha. A picture of her in the Russian *kokoshnik* was prominently displayed

⁸⁶ People Weekly, September 9, 1985.

⁸⁷ Ibid., pp. 34-36.

⁸⁸ Pamphlet, The Samantha Smith Foundation, Hallowell, Maine, Maine State Museum 2010.37.178.1.

⁸⁹ S.1847 ‘Bill to provide for a Samantha Smith Memorial Exchange Program to promote youth exchanges between the United States and the Soviet Union’, 99th Congress (1985-1986), Sen. Mitchell, George J. [D-ME] (Introduced 11/12/1985), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/99th-congress/senate-bill/1847>.

next to the big screens that allowed children from the US and Soviet Union to interact.⁹⁰ Finally, in December 1985, Jane also met Vice-President George Bush at the White House together with some of the Goodwill Games athletes to discuss the Games and work of the Foundation. The fact that this meeting took place highlighted that the administration had gradually move away from the highly confrontational approach towards the Soviet Union. Incidentally, Samantha's death and the creation of the Foundation coincided with the shift in US foreign policy that had begun in 1984 and would allow the White House to engage with advocates of citizen diplomacy in a more open manner.

As a direct result of the numerous high profile media appearances of Samantha's mother donations from organisations and individual vastly exceeded initial expectations. Between September 1985 to September 1986, \$170,950 were received. Plans were made to produce a television movie, hold international youth art competitions and organise a Samantha Smith Memorial exchange programme.⁹¹ While not all of these plans were eventually put in action, in summer 1986, Jane Smith together with twenty of Samantha's classmates visited her favourite place in the Soviet Union – the Pioneer camp Artek. The continuing media coverage and Jane Smith's determination to keep the memory of her daughter meant that members of the American public continued to be inspired and offended by the legacy of Samantha's trip, depending on their political leanings. The foundation regularly received hate mail. One undated letter writer aggressively stated: 'I and many more are sick to death of hearing and reading about Samantha Smith. Please bury her. This worship has become sickening.'⁹²

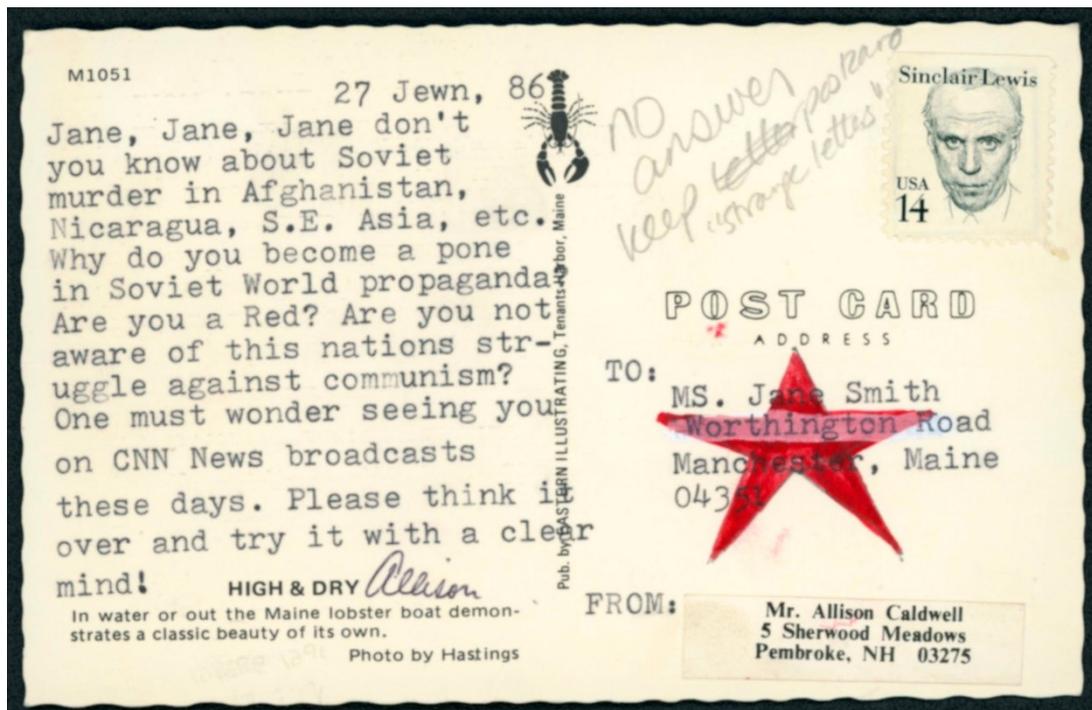


Figure 4: Postcard, Allison Caldwell to Jane Smith, June 27, 1986. Maine State Museum 2010.37.250 Box 1, Folder 3

⁹⁰ Press Clippings from Soviet Newspapers, Maine State Museum 2010.37.190; 'Spacebridge - "Peace Child" - Minneapolis-Moscow, 1985, Highlights' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=asEIRLU3SZM>.

⁹¹ Annual Meeting Report, Samantha Smith Foundation, 1986, Maine State Museum 2010.37.194.

⁹² Letter, anonymous, sent during or after December 1986, Maine State Museum 2010.37.250. Box 1, Folder 1.

Another letter was triggered by Jane Smith's appearance on Boston TV in August 1987. The author, a man from Pembroke, NH send Jane several letters and postcards (example see figure 3). In one of them he asked: 'You and others feel as you continue to cooperate with the Soviet "peace now" policy the world wide communist propaganda machine promotes all over the western world. How do you square your activities with those millions of Afghanistan driven from their homes and starved to death by the Soviet people?'⁹³ While the writer was clearly a sympathiser of the far right (the letter had a picture of Adolf Hitler in the letterhead and finished with a special prayer to Rudolf Hess), there is little question that he was not alone in his critique of the foundation's actions against the background of the ongoing war in Central Asia. The war in Afghanistan was a frequent point of reference in critical letters. In a response to one letter writer, who had included graphic images of the injuries caused by the war, Jane defended the actions of the foundation. She pointed out that 'a very small percentage' of her mail was negative.⁹⁴

Indeed, there were the many people that kept being inspired by Samantha's legacy. In June 1986, Jane Smith received a letter signed 'John Angel', who also included a copy of a letter he had written to Brezhnev in 1982. The author, an evidently deeply religious person, wrote that he was initially very critical of Samantha's trip to the Soviet Union, fearing she would be manipulated for Soviet propaganda. 'But I was wrong', he continued. 'Samantha's idealism and sincerity won out over any political motives lurking in the Soviet Union and she achieved something wondrous in international good will.'⁹⁵ This was certainly a wider sentiment amongst many people. And her death appeared to have only strengthened it.

While the media coverage on the work of the foundation started to decline from 1986 onwards, Samantha's legacy lived on through the work of the foundation as well as the general upsurge in transnational people-to-people and exchange programmes many of whom put a specific focus on youth. In 1985 the organisation Children as Peacemakers, founded in 1982, invited children from 33 nations to San Francisco to honour them for working for of peace. They invited Samantha's mother to accept an award honouring her late daughter.⁹⁶ This was just one of many organisations that put their hopes in the young generation. There was, for example, an organisation called 'Perhaps Kids Meeting Kids Can Make a Difference' founded by the West Side community activist Marvin Sochet in New York. It helped to foster thousands of penpalships between American and Soviet children. The Soviet side involved in facilitating the project made direct references to Samantha in its publications.⁹⁷ Others, such US-USSR Youth Exchange Programme, set up by Cynthia Lazaroff in 1983, enabled hundreds of real encounters between American and Soviet youngsters. In 1987 and 1988, another non-governmental organisation Voices of the Future also enabled two large delegations of American children to visit the Pioneer camp Artek.⁹⁸

The play Peace Child, mentioned earlier, was staged in numerous schools across the US in the late 1980s. It encouraged children to think about the value of people-to-people diplomacy and

⁹³ Letter, Allison Caldwell to Jane Smith, August 24, 1987, Maine State Museum 2010.37.250. Box 1, Folder 2.

⁹⁴ Letter, Stasia Zedzilko to Jane Smith, January 14, 1987; Reply, Jane Smith to Stasia Zedzilko, January 21, 1987, Maine State Museum, 2010.37.250, Box 1, Folder 3.

⁹⁵ Letter, 'John Angel' to Jane Smith, July 24, 1986, , Maine State Museum, 2010.37.250, Box 1, Folder 1.

⁹⁶ Peter Jones (ed.), *Making Friends: Katya from Moscow and Star from San Francisco* (New York, 1987).

⁹⁷ Press Clippings (American and Soviet) on 'Perhaps Kids Meeting Kids can Make a Difference', Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archive, TAM.134, Box 9, Folder 33 TAM 134 Box 9 Folder 33.

⁹⁸ Promotional Leaflet for Artek 1988 trip, Rasha (Smith) Hamid, Personal Collection.

kept Samantha's memory alive. In 1987, for instance, the White House received letters from some youngster in Roanoke, Virginia, who had put on the performance of Peace Child, which had 'ran to "sell out" crowds' and were going to perform it at the Soviet Embassy in May. Melissa Bryant, one of the young letter writers, told the President, 'in the play the Russians and American children become to be good friends and I feel that this is a good example for grown-ups. I would love to be like Samantha Smith and have the opportunity to go to Russia and talk to their leader and learn more about their country.'⁹⁹ She was certainly not alone though for every American child dreaming to be like Samantha Smith, there were thousands of Soviet children.

The Samantha Smith foundation continued its work well into the 1990s. In cooperation with other organisations it not only arranged for several hundreds of American children to visit the Soviet Union, particularly the Artek camp, but it was also able to bring large numbers of Soviet children to the US.¹⁰⁰ The Samantha Smith World Peace Camp in Poland Springs, Maine held in summer 1986, for example, allowed 20 Soviet teenagers to spend four weeks together with 150 American kids, doing sports and hikes, but also activities on conflict resolution and the promotion of world peace.¹⁰¹ However, it is undeniable that Samantha Smith gradually disappeared from the historical narrative of the Cold War in the US. The monument erected outside of the Maine State Museum in Augusta in 1986 and the Samantha Smith Elementary School in Sammamish, WA, are lone reminders in the public space of this extraordinary episode of Cold War history. In the end it was, perhaps ironically, the fulfilment of Samantha's dream, the end of the Cold War, that helped to largely erase her from the American collective memory by the early 1990s. The British *Daily Mail* was right in its prediction that her life would become a 'quirky footnote to history.'¹⁰² However, this applied only to her American legacy. In the Soviet Union she became and is the subject of articles, chapters and books that have kept her memory alive long after the communist state had disappeared.

Soviet-American Heroine

By the time of the plane crash which killed Samantha Smith, she had already acquired the status of a star in the Soviet Union. Mikhail Gorbachev wrote to her grieving mother. His condolences were also published in *Pravda*: 'Everyone in the Soviet Union who has known Samantha Smith will forever remember the image of the American girl who, like millions of Soviet young men and women, dreamt about peace, and about friendship between the peoples of the United States and the Soviet Union.'¹⁰³ Of the 6,000 letters that Samantha received in the first two years following Andropov's high profile response to her letter, the vast majority, her father estimated that three-quarters, were from Soviet children.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, the first letters from the communist country started to arrive very soon after her initial outing in *Pravda*. They usually stressed that

⁹⁹ Letter, Melissa Bryant to Ronald Reagan, Received at The White House on June 26, 1987, ID #495118, PC, WHORM: Subject File, Ronald Reagan Library.

¹⁰⁰ *Samagram*, Vol. 2 No. 1, October/November 1987; *Samantha Smith Newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Winter 1989; Vol. 1 No. 2, Spring 1990; Vol. 1 No. 3, Summer 1990; Vol. 2, No. 2, Fall 1991; Vol. 3, No. 1, Spring 1992.

¹⁰¹ 'At the Summer Summit in Maine, Superpowers' Youth', *New York Times*, August 6, 1989, p. 18; Scrapbook by Soviet children taking part in the Samantha Smith World Peace Camp. Jane Smith. Personal collection.

¹⁰² 'The Short Life and Fame of Samantha Smith', *Daily Mail*, 27 August 1985.

¹⁰³ *Pravda*, August 28, 1985, p. 1; Condolences, Mikhail Gorbachev to Jane Smith, Samantha Smith Foundation, <http://www.samanthasmith.info/index.php/history/history>.

¹⁰⁴ 'Soviet Trip Doesn't Turn Samantha From Softball', *Toledo Blade*, July 2, 1984; Warner 'The Innocent Abroad', p. 302.

Soviet people, and Soviet children in particular, do not want war and commended her decision to visit the Soviet Union to see the country with her own eyes. One young letter writer, twelve year old Yulia from Belgorod, wrote to Samantha on the 1 May 1983. She explained that she had followed the story about her letter exchange with Andropov in the media and was ‘surprised that children of your country think that Soviet People want war. It is good that you are planning to visit our country this summer’, she continued, ‘You will meet the children and be convinced that we do not want war.’¹⁰⁵

With Samantha’s trip to the Soviet Union, and in particular her closely covered visit to the Pioneer camp Artek, she became the friendly face of America and inspired the creation of Clubs of International Friendship in the Soviet republics and across the Eastern bloc. Indeed, Natasha Kashirina, her friend from Artek, became president of one of those children’s clubs that sought to foster human contacts across the bloc boundaries.¹⁰⁶ After her death some of those clubs adopted her name. For example, the International Friendship Club in the School No.9 in Khiva in the Uzbek Republic, as a member declared in a letter to Moscow News in 1985.¹⁰⁷

The plane crash and death of the young diplomat was widely reported in the Soviet media. Eulogies were published in all major newspapers and in the children’s and youth press. Her initial visit had already left a real mark, but her death catapulted her status amongst Soviet children into a new sphere. Yuri Yakovlev, a popular author of books for children and youth, winner of the USSR State Prize, was commissioned to write a book about Samantha Smith. In a short contribution in Moscow News, Yakovlev stressed the purity and innocence of her soul that allowed her to rise above the Cold War divide: ‘Samantha had a rich imagination. It helped her understand things that mattered. It made her heart sensitive and sympathetic to things that left other people cold and indifferent. Samantha sensed the Soviet people’s war sufferings and felt a genuine desire for peace. (...) I am fond of Samantha. She has become the main character in my book and, at the same time, my ideal of a modern child. When I think of my granddaughter Nastya, I wish – with all my heart – that she will be like Samantha.’¹⁰⁸

The eulogies were quickly followed up by commemorative acts to cement Samantha’s place in the collective memory of the country. A commemorative stamp with her image was released within months of her death. Streets, flowers, an asteroid, a diamond, and a mountain were all named after her. The state-supported iconisation ingrained her image into late Cold War Soviet culture. In her death she was fully adopted as a daughter of the Soviet Union. Yuri Yakovlev’s book retelling Samantha’s trip, 144 pages long, was eventually published in April 1987. The first run was 200,000 copies. In an article for Komsomolskaya Pravda, Yakovlev captured the icon-like status of Samantha after her death. The headline was ‘Nasha Samanta’ – ‘Our Samantha’.¹⁰⁹ She had become an idol for Soviet children – one of their own, a role model to emulate. Often encouraged by their teachers and the Pioneer organisations, Soviet children kept writing letters to Samantha. A teacher from Lvov, for instance, produced a scrapbook on Samantha Smith with her third graders during the school year 1985/86. It included various

¹⁰⁵ Letter, Yulia Radchenko to Samantha Smith, May 1, 1983, Maine State Museum, 2010.37.141.1.

¹⁰⁶ ‘Natasha Kashirina Remembers’, 1985, <http://www.samanthasmith.info/index.php/2-uncategorised/140-natasha-kashirina-remembers>.

¹⁰⁷ Scrapbook 1986/87, Maine State Museum, 2010.37.247.1-4.

¹⁰⁸ Yuri Iu. Yakovlev, ‘My Samantha’, *Moscow News*, undated; Scrapbook 1986/87, Maine State Museum, 2010.37.247.1-4.

¹⁰⁹ Yuri Iu. Yakovlev, *Samanta* (Moscow, 1987); Yakovlev, ‘Nasha Samanta’, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, March 8, 1987, p. 3.

press clippings, drawings about peace and friendship between children from across the world, and letters from the pupils to Samantha. These letters addressed her directly and from their content it would seem that not all the children fully realised she had recently died. They are very formulaic and included well-practiced simple slogans, such as ‘I want to live, I don’t want war!’, at times they made direct references to high politics. Kolia, for example, wrote ‘We know that Reagan wants war’. Usually they opened with the sentence along the lines: ‘I have never met you, but I know you very well. Most of them also mention her trip to Artek. This is no coincidence. Her trip to Artek had become a centrepiece of the Soviet narrative to consolidate her status as a role model for Soviet children. ‘Artek’, one of the press clippings glued into the scrapbook by the children is headlined, ‘will not forget Samantha’.¹¹⁰ Indeed, at the camp a Samantha Smith Alley and a monument was ceremonially opened on the 4 July 1986. *Pionerskaya Pravda* gave close coverage to her mother’s and classmates’ visit of the camp in 1986.¹¹¹ Samantha Smith’s name became forever linked to the history of the camp on the Black Sea.

Vast coverage in the Soviet media was also given to peace tour of the United States in memory of Samantha Smith by Katya Lycheva, a eleven year-old girl from Leningrad, in March 1986. The trip was organised by the organisation US organisation Children as Peacemakers in cooperation with the Soviet Peace Committee. In the United States the reporting was rather subdued even though Lycheva had a short meeting with President Reagan.¹¹² The scrapbook produced by Soviet third grader in 1986/87, mentioned above, had an envelope glued to the inside of the backcover. It was filled with more articles on Samantha but also on Katya Lycheva peace trip to the USA. Katya, it was made clear to young Soviet readers, was continuing the work of the young American child diplomat. Her visit to the United States in 1986 became important step in the ongoing iconisation of Samantha Smith as a role model for Soviet children.¹¹³ When Samantha’s mother was visiting the Soviet Union that summer, she met Katya at a ceremony in Moscow for the unveiling of a sculpture of Samantha by Soviet artist, Vladimir Aksenov.¹¹⁴

In the late 1980s, the young Soviet generation grew up with Samantha Smith as the friendly face of America. Stories about young heroes has been a centre piece of the Soviet children’s literature from the early days of the Soviet Union. Samantha now joined the canon of young heroes. Hundreds of articles appeared over the years in the press, books were published, monuments erected, commemorative acts held. In the children and youth organisations, she assumed the status of a heroine, and many Soviet children clearly assumed that this was also the case in the USA. In an article recently published in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, Oksana Fomina, a girl that took part in an exchange in 1991, remembered how surprised she was about the lack of knowledge and remembrance of Samantha Smith, even in her home State of Maine. She visited Samantha’s old school and expected to make lots of pictures of commemorative tributes. Yet, the only sign of Samantha’s existence she found was a picture in the school’s

¹¹⁰ Scrapbook 1985/86, Maine State Museum, 2010.37.247.1-4.

¹¹¹ *Pionerskaya Pravda*, July 11, 1986, p. 1.

¹¹² Ronald Reagan Library C34019-23.

<https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/archives/photographs/large/c34019-23.jpg>

¹¹³ Scrapbook 1985/86, numerous undated press clippings. Maine State Museum, 2010.37.247.1-4; furthermore Press clippings, Maine State Museum, 210.37.248; for example, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, March 21, 1986; *Izvestia*, March 23, 1986.

¹¹⁴ Scrapbook 1986/87, undated press clipping. Maine State Museum, 2010.37.247.1-4.

library. It left her upset, she wrote.¹¹⁵ Indeed, it should be noted that an attempt to rename Samantha's school in her honour as a memorial to her activism, was not fruitful.¹¹⁶

Legacies

In 1985, the year of her death, Samantha was interviewed by Brian Caseneuve, a journalist from the *The Daily Free Press*. Afterwards, he wrote a letter to Samantha: 'I'm sure people will always be inspired by your warmth and sensitivity to these people whom many of us are too afraid to learn about'. Furthermore, he congratulated her on the promising start of her Hollywood career, having just landed a regular spot on *Lime Street*. 'Are you going to be an actress or a diplomat? Hey, with that combination you could be President'.¹¹⁷ There was some truth in Caseneuve's tongue in cheek comment. By the time she tragically passed away, Samantha had in many respects replicated the successful combination of Hollywood and politics that had brought the sitting US President into office. Moreover, she had indirectly confronted him. Her trip to the Soviet Union and subsequent conduct had signalled an important challenge to the 'Actor President's' evil-empire-rhetoric. It created a space for a growing number of people on both sides of the divide to question negative stereotypes and contest the image of the enemy at the very time when the political discourse pointed to war. As the Joint Resolution of the Senate Chamber and House of Representatives of the State of Maine put it in May 1983, before Samantha had even gone to the Soviet Union, a '5th grader's letter touched on the simple and fundamental dream of all people everywhere "to live in peace, to trade and cooperate with all our neighbours on the globe"¹¹⁸ For Soviet cultural diplomacy and its advocacy of the Soviet vision for world peace the wider impact of her visit in summer 1983 was a resounding success.

The timing of her letter and invitation made her instantly a poster child of citizen diplomacy, but it was her genuine ability to connect with people at home and abroad that made her trip more than an obscure episode in the propaganda war between the superpowers. The broad coverage in the American media, including and very importantly in local media, magnified the effect of Samantha's warm encounters with ordinary Soviets as well as dignitaries. The trip, it should be noted, took place only a few months before the TV film *The Day After* shocked American audiences and fed anxieties of a nuclear holocaust. Samantha's letter had thus not only captured the fears of American youth, but of significant sections of the wider American public. Its selection for publication in *Pravda*, elevated her into a spokeswoman of her generation in the United States *and* the USSR.

During her lifetime and in death, the Reagan Administration was unsure about how best to deal with the case of the young goodwill ambassador, reacting rather than proactively shaping the narrative and events. Soon after the tragic plane crash had brought her back onto the front pages of the US media, memory of Samantha gradually faded amongst the American public. This, as closer analysis has revealed, should nevertheless not overshadow the importance of her conduct as an envoy of world peace. Samantha did not single-handedly change the course of the Cold

¹¹⁵ www.kp.ru/daily/26696/3721008/.

¹¹⁶ Smith, Jane. Interview by Matthias Neumann.

¹¹⁷ Letter, Brian Caseneuve to Samantha Smith, undated, Maine State Museum 2010.37.137.1-2.

¹¹⁸ Joint Resolution of the Senate Chamber and House of Representatives of the State of Maine, May 10, 1983, Maine State Museum 2010.37.150.

War. But we have seen, the extensive US media coverage in itself, positive and negative, spurred a debate on the 'evil empire' rhetoric because it questioned deeply entrenched representations of the 'other'. It would also lead an increasing number of ordinary Americans to dare engaging in people-to-people diplomacy.

When the US administration's foreign policy finally shifted away from confrontation to cooperation, taking Soviet initiatives under the new General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev seriously, citizen diplomacy was eventually recognised and encouraged by President Reagan as an important driver to improve American-Soviet relations.¹¹⁹ However, the triumphalism following the end of the Cold War meant that the role of citizen diplomacy in ending the conflict has until recently been dismissed or ignored. In fact, as David Foglesong has forcefully argued, in the hearts and minds of many Americans and Soviets the Cold War ended long before President George H. W. Bush declared it to be over.¹²⁰ Samantha Smith's trip, as his article has demonstrated, played an important role in starting to break down popular images of the enemy.

On her final press conference, just before her departure from Sheremetyevo airport, Samantha was asked what she would tell her friends back home. Samantha responded: 'That Soviet people are really nice people. They are almost like Americans'.¹²¹ It was a simple message an increasing number of people were keen to embrace on both sides of the ideological divide. Olga Volkova, her young Artek Pioneer leader, asserted that children diplomacy changed her and her generation attitude towards America. 'I was convinced they are going to nuke us', she remembered her anxieties about the international situation of the early 1980s. Her encounter with the young charming girl from Maine changed her perceptions.¹²² As Samantha became a symbol of world peace after her death, she kept inspiring people to promote transnational friendship, particularly amongst children. One of Samantha's classmates, Yvette Saint-André, for example, pursued a career in foreign affairs and eventually ended up working for the US Department of State. Reflecting on her pathway, she remembered how she had put together a scrapbook with articles on Samantha's fairy-tale trip and took part in an inspiring visit of the famous Artek camp in 1987: 'Her goodwill tour sowed a seed in me, making me realize that just one person can truly make a difference in international diplomacy.'¹²³

As it has been shown, in the Soviet Union her significance as a role model inspiring young children exceeded her impact back in the USA. Many young Soviet children dreamt about becoming goodwill ambassador because they grew up with the inspiring but also tragic tale of Samantha. Encouraged by her mother, who worked on youth exchange programme, Elizabeth Amant, for instance, began to put together a scrapbook (Figure 4) with articles on Samantha in the early 1990s, at the very time the system she had grown up under collapsed. Nevertheless, Samantha still inspired her to become a goodwill ambassador. Indeed, her ambitious childhood dream was to be elected the first female General Secretary of the United Nations. While Amant

¹¹⁹ Jack F. Matlock, Jr., *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended* (New York, 2004), 139. See also David S. Foglesong, 'Citizen Diplomacy and the Breaking of Images of the Enemy', pp. 1-2.

¹²⁰ Foglesong, 'Citizen Diplomacy and the Breaking of Images of the Enemy', p. 6.

¹²¹ Samantha Smith's Press Conference in Moscow, July 1983, www.youtube.com/watch?v=3T4lZnGnY3A&t=494s.

¹²² Volkova, Olga. Interview by Matthias Neumann.

¹²³ Yvette Saint-André, 'I Remember Samantha Smith: Goodwill Ambassador', https://web.archive.org/web/20080219074549/http://moscow.usembassy.gov/200th/anniversary.php?record_id=yvette.

did not fulfil her dream of rising to the top of the United Nations, she continued on Samantha's steps by visiting Artek camp as a child in the 1990s. Embracing Artek's *Leitmotiv* of 'Peace and Friendship', Amant returned to the camp on Crimea many times since and now runs the alumni network 'Artek Global' on Facebook.¹²⁴



Figure 5: Scrapbook by Elizabeth Amant. Personal collection. The title on the front page (left) reads 'Malen'kii posol mira – Little Ambassador of Peace'

The state-supported iconisation and commemoration of Samantha Smith inevitably stopped with the fall of communism and the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, her place in the collective memory of the last Soviet generation survived. One of the reasons for this was the way the story of Samantha Smith became mixed up with the surge in Soviet nostalgia and a reassessment of the recent Soviet past. For a significant number of citizens of the former Soviet Union born in the late 1970s and 1980s, images of Samantha Smith amongst laughing, playing and sunbathing children at Artek evoke positive memories of their sheltered childhood under the Soviet system. As Catriona Kelly has pointed out, in the post-Soviet era and as a result of the 'privatisation' of life, particularly in the urban environment, 'the myth of "happy childhood" did acquire a nostalgia-soaked apparent authenticity that it had not radiated before the system it supported vanished'.¹²⁵ The comprehensive state provision of childcare, education, and leisure activities for its young generation is often brought up as one of the most positive and valuable aspects of the Soviet era by people that grew up under the system.¹²⁶

The image of the young American girl, her innocence, kindness, and her genuine interaction with her Soviet peers, thus resonate with widespread sentiments about the negative effects of Westernisation on children. As Samantha was adopted by the Soviet people as 'one of us' in the late 1980s, she became a symbol of the superiority of the Soviet education system – reinforcing the myth of the 'Happy Soviet Childhood' in the Soviet and post-Soviet era. While the Soviet childhood experience had always been shaped by the tensions between the view 'of childhood as joyful and sacrosanct, of the child's world as a psychological domain of innocence and wonder, to be preserved intact as long as possible; and the view of childhood as the material

¹²⁴ Amant, Elizabeth (Artek-Global Inc.). Interview by Matthias Neumann. Washington D.C. March 29, 2018. www.facebook.com/groups/artekglobal/.

¹²⁵ Catriona Kelly, *Children's World: Growing up in Russia, 1890-1991* (New Haven, 2007), pp. 591-592.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 598.

for the future adulthood, to be disciplined and shaped as early as might be practicable¹²⁷, the latter was to become overshadowed in popular nostalgia and the memory of the Soviet period filtered through the post-Soviet experience of turmoil and chaos under President Yelstin. As a foreigner who embraced her Soviet peers, Samantha provided the external validation for the beauty of Soviet childhood. The latter was irrevocably lost when the Soviet state collapsed in 1991, just as Samantha had been when her plane crashed six years earlier. The fate of both became somewhat linked in popular memory particularly amongst the last Soviet generation. Her legacy is thus still very much alive.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 570.