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Prof Gerhard Töttemeyer, Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Namibia

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SOVIET VISIT

From Russia with love

By Ronel Scheffer

AN EARLY – and controversial – Christmas gift to the political and academic community in South Africa was the visit by noted Soviet academics Irina Filatova and Apollon Davidson in the first weeks of December.

Two delightful (but very much no-nonsense) characters, the history professors and African specialists at Moscow State University quickly gained a reputation in the press for being "difficult". If they were politically less outspoken than some expected, they were certainly far too circumspect in their approach for the liking of most.

After a week in Johannesburg, which included a baptism of fire from forthright questioners at a public meeting, the two opened a press conference in Cape Town with an unusual request. Would the journalists present "please ask original questions", pleaded an exasperated Davidson.

The first Soviet academics to visit the

out clearly denouncing or rejecting them as mistakes. In the Soviet Union, this break with the past had occurred and, as historians, they felt that the De Klerk government would need to follow suit if its reforms were meant to be radical.

In their experience, open discussion in the media was a necessary first step to overcome the social difficulties resulting from bad policies of the past. In the Soviet Union, this has in fact accelerated the process of coming to terms with past mistakes, says Davidson.

And the mistakes of socialism? The Soviet Union's response is to develop and improve socialism, which is still very popular and regarded as the only system which is able to provide social justice. "Perestroika has nothing to do with capitalism, the issue is how to develop and improve socialism," said Filatova.

Davidson added that whereas the origins of capitalism go back several centuries, the history of socialism has just begun and its journey is a very difficult one. "In the



Filatova and Davidson face the press in Cape Town.

country in more than 50 years, their schedule was crammed. They were under pressure, privately and in public, to provide definitive answers on the complex questions of the future of socialism, developments in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union's relationship with the ANC and a host of local issues.

At times they were expected to answer for the Soviet government too, and their comments were not always accurately reported or placed in context.

As they travelled from Johannesburg to Cape Town and on to Port Elizabeth as guests of Idasa, visiting universities and townships and meeting MDM leaders, Filatova and Davidson spelt out the dangers of over-simplification and comparison and stressed the importance of solutions based on local conditions. "All people and all countries have to learn from their own mistakes, their own achievements and their own histories," said Filatova.

What they found disconcerting in South Africa was the apparent attempt by the government to move away from policies, with-

first periods of socialism unfortunately some mistakes were made in each country and I am sure that socialism in the next century may be quite different from now, as capitalism now is not the same as in the 18th century."

The two academics were impressed with the political awareness and deep concern about the future of the country they found among all South Africans they met - from Soshanguve to Stellenbosch. They were surprised too, by the objective, reasonable analysis they encountered in the townships and shanty-towns, places where more fanaticism and hatred could be expected.

Among their disappointments were the many distorted views of the Soviet Union, the poor understanding of events in that country - even among intellectuals, and the reporting in some newspapers which were, as Davidson described it, "very rough with Irina's and my answers".

It is expected that the academics' visit may be followed by return visits to Moscow by a number of small groups of South Africans this year.