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ARTICLE

Spatial Imaginary in "Western" Travelogues about Russia[1]

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ABSTRACT

Travel literature provides the readers with access to the most remote places but also reproduces the so-called "traveler's gaze", thus connecting and separating people at the same time. Through individual travel narratives globalization processes get inscribed into an individual identity of the author and the reader. This article analyzes how Russia is presented in three travelogues written by American journalists: Andrew Meier (2003); David Greene (2014); and Anne Garrels (2016). These narratives are considered by focusing on the three dichotomies, around which the characteristics of modern societies are constructed: centre/periphery, past/present, and political/individual. Russia's trajectory of modernity, according to Western travelogues, is predominantly oriented towards the country's past – the legacy of the Soviet Union and Russian Empire, which means that virtually no place is left for the "future", associated with democratization, liberalization, individualization, and environmental awareness. As the narrators see it, the centre's priority is to maintain control over the periphery and to hold the country together at any cost, which makes all other considerations, including the well-being of the people, secondary. Therefore, there is a constant struggle between the political and the individual, with people seeking to protect their private worlds from the encroaching power of the government.

KEYWORDS

spatial imaginary, modernity, travelogue, Russia, travel narrative

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Globalization transforms modern society in different ways: several waves of democratization swept across the globe; a global market and global capitalism emerged as well as global networks of communication and transport. Among these diverse and disparate processes, the development of travel industry has brought globalization in the flesh to everyone and contributed to the growing global connectivity.

Travel literature, developing alongside the thriving travel industry, on the one hand, provides the reading public with access to "faraway", exotic countries and, on the other, helps maintain the spatial differentiations such as the distance between the West and the Rest and the reproduction of the "traveler's gaze". Therefore, travelogues connect and separate people at the same time. But unlike travel guides and standard tour descriptions, travelogues or personal accounts of journeys, generally told in the first person, offer an individualized view on the destination and present experience of an independent traveler. Thus, globalization processes are inscribed into an individual identity and the life story of the author, as well as the reader. Travel writing is known for its hybridity, both in terms of form and content: today, available on-line and in print, in textual, audio or video format, it constitutes spatial imagination as much as traditional ways of spatial construction, such as geography lessons, maps, geopolitical debates, and so on.

Travelogue as a genre began to crystallize in the sixteenth century, and the whole travel book industry boomed in the late eighteenth century. Originally, travel writing was an important source of information available to the mass public about the non-European world, which explains why this genre is so sensitive to the delicate balance between truth and fiction. This "built-in" anxiety or the search for authenticity (the true and genuine socio-cultural experience) lies at the core of modern travelogue (Zilcosky, 2008). Authenticity is associated with the otherness of a place but also with its remoteness, both in space and time. Judging by the unrelenting interest of the Western public towards travel books about Russia – these books keep being published and keep ranking high on national and international bestsellers' lists, Russia still has not lost its "exotic" flavour. A good example of a travelogue playing on Russia's exoticism is hugely popular Peter Pomerantsev's "Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia". Even though this book mostly focuses on Moscow and the central part of Russia, it attracts attention by exploring its "darker" and "glamorous" side – private life of Russian oligarchs, suicides of Russian super-models, the ways of Russian mafia, and its connections to high government officials.

Within the theory of modernity, there seems to be some uncertainty as to Russia's place within the established East-West/North-South dichotomies: as Madina Tlostanova puts it, Russia "disrupts" this binarism by being at once 'the colonizer and the colonized, unable to join any of the extremes, and generating oxymoronic subcategories instead, such as the poor north of the south of the poor north' (Tlostanova, 2012). This "in-betweenness" of Russia – between Europe and Asia, the intelligentsia and the people, Orthodoxy and science – is also discussed by Maxim Khomyakov, who contends that it is precisely this search for the "middle way in modernity" that constitutes Russian modernity (Khomyakov, 2017). Tlostanova

refers to this phenomenon as “dependent and mimicking modernity” (Tlostanova, 2012). “Inscribing Russia” into modernity can be done on different levels and with different purposes: by social theorists, by politicians, or by journalists. Yet, the spatial imaginary is not formed by analytical schemes or political strategizing alone, it lives due to vivid images, gripping stories that are told by those who have the first-hand experience of Russian realities. This direct, ethnographic, though not academic, experience recounted in travel literature is mass printed and accessible to the widest audience. It is read by cultural elites, as well as by ordinary people. Travel writers often provide the reader with reflections on Russian history and generalizations about Russia’s future that exceed the scope of narrated anecdotes. Thus, travel literature greatly contributes to spatial imaginary and the way Russia’s path to modernity is perceived.

Travelogue’s emphasis on individuality of travel experience brings to the fore the figure of the narrator (subject/observer). In the studies of the colonial or post-colonial travelogue, therefore, much attention has been given to the narrator with regard to their race, gender, social status, education, and so on. The term “narratorial persona” highlights the fact how elaborately “crafted” the image of the narrator is: authors can assign to their personae specific “poses” and “points of view” in order to produce the desired effect on the reading audience, creating, on the one hand, a feeling of smooth and spontaneous narrative and, on the other hand, making the text persuasive and maintaining their authority on the matters they are writing about (for more on narratorial persona see, for instance, Dickinson, 2007). In the classical colonial travelogue, the dominant narratorial persona was that of a white man – the “traveler” and “explorer”, who sought to “discover” and “master” the yet unknown land (“I am monarch of all I survey”). Therefore, any changes in the narratorial persona attracted scholarly interest as to whether the resulting narrative supports or, on the contrary, undermines colonial discourse (see, for instance, the seminal works on the ambivalence of women’s colonial travel writing by Sara Mills and Mary-Louise Pratt). In modern travelogue, which is generally characterized by constant oscillations between the “colonial” and “cosmopolitan” modes, there is much greater diversity in the types of narratorial personae although the “white male” type still prevails, which results in criticisms directed against such prominent modern travel writers as Bruce Chatwin and Paul Theroux, who allegedly “failed” to be truly cosmopolitan and instead reproduced in their narratives the same colonial “white male gaze” (see Johnson, 2002; Lisle, 2006). In our study, we have not found any significant differences in the narratives that could be explained by the gender of the narratorial personae, although Anne Garrels does tend to give more attention to the life of Russian women than her male colleagues. In our view, what is much more crucial for the narratives in question is the national and professional background of the narrators: representatives of American culture and professional journalists.

For our study, we have chosen three travelogues: Andrew Meier’s “Black Earth: A Journey Through Russia After the Fall” (2003); David Greene’s “Midnight in Siberia: A Train Journey into the Heart of Russia” (2014); and Anne Garrels’ “Putin Country. A Journey into the Real Russia” (2016). Both David Greene and Anne

Garrels worked for the American radio station NPR (National Public Radio) while Andrew Meier was a correspondent for "Time" magazine. Each of these journalists spent a considerable amount of time in Russia: for instance, David Greene was the chief of the NPR's Moscow bureau for three years, while Andrew Meier worked as a Moscow correspondent for "Time". To the best of our knowledge, despite their success at home, none of these books has yet been translated into Russian.

All of the three travelogues are well-researched and well-crafted as they skillfully fit together interviews, facts and figures, biographical information, journalistic investigations, historical descriptions, and reflections on Russia's present, past and future. Greene's travelogue is formally organized around his journey on the Trans-Siberian railway and thus progresses linearly, following what can be called a more 'traditional' mode of travel writing with clearly defined points of departure and arrival. Garrels' book focuses on one city and the surrounding region – Chelyabinsk – and summarizes several trips made to this area between the 1990s and 2010s. Meier's book is the most versatile and comprehensive of all, as it covers the author's multiple trips to various cities and regions of Russia – apart from Moscow and St. Petersburg, these include Chechnya, Siberia, Sakhalin, and the Arctic. It should be noted that after careful reading of Greene's travelogue, it becomes evident that his narrative is also based on several trips rather than one, which he also made clear in one of his interviews, stating that he had actually made three trips to different parts of Russia.

Since all of the travelogues are dealing with a wide range of "sensitive" topics, each of the writers stresses the importance of the rapport and trust that they had managed to build with their "contacts", which makes the question of the language crucial. As Colin Thubron, an author of the earlier travelogue "In Siberia" (1999), pointed out in his interview to BBC Book Club, the knowledge of the Russian language was essential to gain the trust of his respondents, so he had to make use of whatever limited Russian vocabulary he had rather than to resort to a translator's help as all of his respondents were extremely wary of any strangers being present at the interview (Flynn, 2018). The caution shown by many respondents, who were afraid of the police, Federal Security Service (FSB), and troubles at work if their names got disclosed, is on many occasions also stressed by Anne Garrels (one of her respondents actually escaped while she was dealing with the unexpected visitors from the police). Although some of the Russian people described in the travelogues could speak English, the vast majority couldn't. Both Anne Garrels and Andrew Meier are fluent speakers of Russian while David Greene travelled together with his friend and NPR colleague Sergey, who also introduced Greene to his own family and friends in Nizhny Novgorod, thus acting as a translator and as an intermediary between the writer and the local community. In all the three travelogues, the authors maintain their authority and expertise by demonstrating their intimate knowledge of Russian life and the "authenticity" of their experience of Russia, gained through years of living in the country and through contacts with Russian people, not only as respondents, but also as acquaintances and close friends. (We should note here that the word "Russian" is used here as a general term for all the people living on the territory of the Russian Federation as the authors of the travelogues in question make a special point of involving representatives of

various ethnic minority groups in their narrative – Tatars, Bashkirs, Chechen, Udmurt, and so on). All the three authors have managed to create a narrative that seems to be sufficiently authentic and trustworthy to the "domestic" public, which becomes obvious if one looks at the readers' comments to these books on web-sites such as "Goodreads". For instance, the predominant response to Andrew Meier's book was that even though there is a lot of "gloom and doom" in this story and the book is not to be taken "lightly", it manages to provide an accurate picture of present-day Russia, the "mindset" of its people and their struggles.

Each narrative is characterized by its own individual intonation – in David Greene's travelogue it is of a more non-judgmental, sympathetic and at times humorous kind; Andrew Meier strives for more "drama" and includes fictionalized accounts of historical events and "behind the scenes"; he also often resorts to accentuated symbolism while Anne Garrels seems to be much more critical and uncompromising in her evaluations of what is happening in Russia without making allowances for the difficult past or national mentality. Nevertheless, all the three authors to different degrees share the sense of wonder, confusion and dismay at the perceived "failure" of Russian people to adopt Western values such as democracy, human rights, equality, and freedom, even though the Russians are aware of these values and even though they had a "window of opportunity" open for them after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

We are going to consider the three travelogues by focusing on the following aspects constituting modern societies:

– Centre/periphery;
– Past/present;
– Political/personal.

In the travelogues, the centre/periphery dichotomy can take different forms: the West vs. Russia; Moscow vs. the regions; urban vs. rural areas. The dichotomy between the West and Russia mostly comes up in the narrators' conversations with their Russian respondents, who refer to the West as Russia's chief opponent. As one of Anne Garrels' respondents puts it, "the United States applies one law to itself and another to everyone else" (Garrels, 2016, p. 34) and, therefore, would not "allow comparable Russian interference in its own affairs or in its sphere of interest" (Garrels, 2016, p. 35). On the other hand, the West is also used as the norm and the measure of economic prosperity, to which Russia should aspire.

Much more explicit is the opposition between the capital and the regions: the movement away from the centre to the periphery, that is, from the more "European" regions of Russia eastwards or northwards is often described as the movement backwards in time, the writers emphasizing the vastness of the Russian territory and the time it takes to reach different places. This feeling of vast space enhances the feeling of remoteness and isolation of its towns and settlements scattered along the way. It was also this vastness of the country's territory that allowed Russian and Soviet governments to use Siberia and the Far East as places of exile and penal labour, which now turns them into the repositories of their dark and tragic past and makes them unable to "move on" to the present or to the future:

> On our wall map at home Norilsk loomed *at the edge of civilization*. It seemed a place at once ominous and illuminating, a corner of Russia where one could measure not only the gap between the newly rich and the long poor but the *haunting legacy of the unfinished past*, the past had been exhumed, laid bare, only to be abandoned, unexamined and unburied. *Nothing had resettled right*. In more cosmopolitan corners, life had of course moved on. In Moscow and Petersburg, sushi bars, casinos, and soup kitchens had quickly appeared. But Norilsk, for all its riches, *remained a severed world*, *a Pompeii of Stalinism* that the *trapped heirs of the Gulag* still called home (Meier, 2003, p. 182) (*italics mine – E. P.*)

In some regions, this travel back in time "lingers" on the comparatively recent past of the Perestroika period, in some, on the Soviet era, while in others, it goes back to the nineteenth century or even further. There are layers of historical time distinguishable within the urban landscape of Russian cities and towns. For instance, this is how Krasnoyarsk is described by Andrew Meier:

> Instead of *post-Soviet* industrial decay, *an unexpected sense of the past prevailed*. Downtown offered a tidy array of narrow thoroughfares – *Lenin, Peace, and Marx streets* – that paralleled the river. There were more *nineteenth-century* private houses than twentieth-century apartment blocks (Meier, 2003, p. 183) (*italics mine – E. P.*)

One of the typical tropes used in travelogues is the metaphorical comparison of the country's territory to a body and travelogues about Russia are not an exception. One of their common features is pointing to the fact that the travel is made right to the "heart" of the country (Anne Garrels' "A Train Journey to the Heart of Russia" or another recent book entitled "Russia: A Journey to the Heart of a Land and its People" by Jonathan Dimbleby). Where this "heart" exactly lies is left to the author's choice and imagination: it can be the central part, Urals, Siberia, or further to the east, the only definite thing is that it should be in the "outback", that is, not Moscow or St. Petersburg. The vastness of the country is combined with the lack of internal order or interconnectedness as the country seems to consist of disorganized fragments artificially held together by some external force lest this "body" should start to disintegrate: for example, David Greene refers to the Trans-Siberian railway as the "spine", "a thin line of constancy that holds this unwieldy country together" (Greene, 2014, p. 8), "the link that connects so many disparate places" (Greene, 2014, p. 64). This is how he describes his perception of Russia's space while being on a train:

> By far, Russia takes up more of the earth than any other country. I knew this. But the earlier Trans-Siberian trip I did back in 2011 made me *feel* it. Four, five, six hours would pass, and all we would see outside was empty, white wilderness. Then a forest. Then a small city, with some decaying buildings – often an empty Soviet factory. Then hours more of nothing (Greene, 2014, p. 78)

Throughout his travelogue, Greene returns to this idea on several occasions:

> Moscow seems so very far away as we push eastward. The feeling of disconnect grows, making it seem unsurprising that having people scattered in such remote places is a drag on a nation's economy. Politically the disconnect works in different ways. Many people in Siberia feel little if any relationship to Moscow and the Kremlin, and throughout history, people have felt relatively more free to think for themselves. And yet, distance is also an impediment for any serious opposition movement to grow and thrive (Greene, 2014, p. 223)

This feeling of imminent disintegration of the "old empire" is conveyed in Andrew Meier's text, a considerable part of which is devoted to Chechnya and to the gruesome stories of the first and second Chechen wars told by Russian and Chechen soldiers and civilians. The desperate attempts of the Russian government to maintain its control over this region and keep it within Russia had disastrous consequences both for the Russian and Chechen sides. The conflict has not been fully resolved, and has given rise to extremism and radicalization of Muslims, which, in its turn, led to increased counter-terrorism efforts on the part of the government and to extra pressure on Muslim communities not only in the Caucasus but also across other regions of Russia (Garrels, 2016, pp. 116–117). The title of Andrew Meier's book alludes to Leo Toltsoy's novel "Hadji Murad" and in the chapter on Chechnya Meier makes it clear that he subscribes to Tolstoy's view about "all sorts of villainy" that a large state with a considerable military strength can commit against "small peoples, living their own independent life", under the pretext of self-defense or a civilizing mission (Meier, 2003, p. 164). Thus, Meier condemns the imperial ambitions of the Russian state, bringing nothing but suffering and deprivation to "small peoples" but also to the Russian people – the Chechen war veterans and their families and to the families of those who lost their fathers and sons to this war.

All authors touch upon the question of the Chechen wars as they meet the survivors of these wars from both sides. It is largely the Russian military campaign in Chechnya that leads the narrators to point out that the interests of "Moscow" and "Kremlin" are inimical to the interests of other Russian regions and the interests of the multi-ethnic communities inhabiting them. The idea that Moscow is not "truly" Russian, that is fails to embody Russianness is raised in Andrew Meier's travelogue:

> "Moscow is not Russia". It is the refrain of Westerners and Russians alike who have ventured into the Russian outback and returned to tell of its miseries. But what, then, is Moscow? (Meier, 2003, p. 24)

The urban/rural dichotomy also corresponds to that of rich/poor and new/old. The "old" Russia, also often referred to as the "dead" empire or the "ruins of the empire", that is, the remnants of the Soviet period, is contrasted with the "new Russia" and the "new opulence" of the post-Soviet period. Travelogue "Black Earth" takes this line a bit further by drawing the distinction between the "New Russians" and "most Russians, being Old Russians", who "naturally hated the New Russians", and thus revealing the great divide within the Russian society (Meier, 2003, p. 31).

The stark contrast between Russia's urban areas and countryside is described by Anne Garrels the following way:

> If you were to take a helicopter ride over Russia's countryside, you might think a war had recently ravaged the landscape. The former state and collective farms, each of which employed hundreds against all economic sense, are in ruins (Garrels, 2016, p. 175)

Interestingly enough, even though being further away from the capital means having less access to resources, funding and power, it also means more autonomy, which the regions enjoy:

> Krasnoyarsk told another story. It testified to the adage I had heard so often in Russia's remote corners: "The farther from Moscow we live, the better" (Meier, 2003, p. 187)

Although in travel literature, the chronotope usually tends to be space dominated, in the case of travelogues about Russia, its temporal side is much more dramatic. The past/present dichotomy leaves little place for the future since, as David Greene puts it, "modern Russia seems to be living in a void", "careering down an uncertain path" (Greene, 2014, pp. 26–27). Yet another, more depressing view is best summarized by the final scene in Colin Thubron's book:

> Yuri says: "We're not the same as you in the West. Maybe we're more like you were centuries ago. We're late with our history here. With us, time still goes in circles" (Thubron, 1999, p. 341)

David Greene quotes the writer Mikhail Shishkin, who offered his own updated version of Gogol's troika and emphasized the repetitive pattern in Russia's historical development by comparing the country to a metro train that "travels from one end of a tunnel to the other – from order dictatorship to anarchy democracy, and back again" (Greene, 2014, p. 24). Thus, in the case of Russia, there is no linear development towards the Western-style modernity but, rather, there is a spiral or, in a worse scenario, a circle as the modernization is largely "mimicked" rather than actually achieved.

One of the points made by all the authors is the perceived inability or reluctance of Russian people to deal with the past ("confront the horror of the past") and to reflect about it, which, as is logically presumed, makes the Russians unable to achieve any kind of closure ("unburied past"). In his interview to BBC Book Club, Colin Thubron expressed his puzzlement over the way the former GULAG sites are treated in Russia and compared it to the way former concentration camps are turned into museums in Germany: in Russia, these sites just lie abandoned (Flynn, 2018). The same comparison is drawn by Andrew Meier, who, nevertheless, points out that "Germany started to examine its past only after an economic miracle", while Russia is still "economically, socially, and ideologically adrift" (Meier, 2003, p. 240).

David Greene, however, believes that it is precisely this inability to come to grips with the past that prevents the Russians from addressing the questions of the future, in fact, even prevents them from asking any questions about their current life:

> And across this vast country the emotion that remained constant was an uneasy frustration: Here are millions of people across different landscapes, climates, and communities, all with families they love and ideas to offer, but almost universally unable to answer some simple questions: Where is your country going? And what do *you* want for its future? (Greene, 2014, p. 27)

The word that frequently comes up in Greene's text is "mind-boggling" and the recurring theme in his travelogue, something that he finds particularly "mind-boggling" is the fact that while his and his wife's immediate reaction to things that seemed absurd or meaningless was to start asking questions, Russian people simply went through the whole process without questioning the reason for doing so (e.g. an episode of going through the unmanned security checkpoint at the railway station):

> Not everyone is a fighter. But there is a sense at home that if something seems unfair in life, there are places to turn – at work, or in a community. Maybe you won't get your way… Our system is far from perfect, and people are mistreated. But the overall spirit, the sense of possibility, the sense that you can raise your voice and have a chance to bring change, is something that exists at home, but not so much in Russia (Greene, 2014, p. 108)

This acceptance, patience and willingness to endure is one of the features that is described by all the authors as constituting the core of the Russian mentality, and summarized by Andrew Meier in the "hollow comfort" of the Russian word "*normal'no*":

> Everything in Russia after all was always normal. It was the understatement of the cosmonaut ascribed to his crash in space – and the recovery that followed. It was the charity the miners and survivors of Norilsk lent to their impossible lives. It was the illusion shared by the Russian soldiers who sorted the corpses from the Zone and the Chechens who bathed and buried the dead in Aldy (Meier, 2003, p. 483)

While villages are mostly depicted as archaic and derelict, half-abandoned places, devoid of any hope for the future, Russian cities are shown as having all the usual attributes of globalization such as McDonalds and international hotel chains, sitting side by side with Soviet-style blocks and a few older, nineteenth-century buildings. Anne Garrels describes the centre of Chelyabinsk, which looks completely Westernized and has a replica of an American diner "Pretty Betty", "elegant eateries in the neighbourhood with names like Venice, Basilio, Deja-Vu, Avignon, and Titanic", "the more sophisticated Wall Street Café", "full of young professionals sipping cappuccinos and single malt", clubs and bars (Garrels, 2016, p. 15). The mimicking character of this "Western-style" glamour becomes apparent when she tries to interview local musicians,

who are signing "Oh, Pretty Woman" in "flawless English" and are "indistinguishable from their Western counterparts in jeans and T-shirts" (Garrels, 2016, p. 16). As it turns out, apart from the songs' lyrics, they cannot speak any English at all. Another remarkable detail is that they get to sing British and American songs at "annual fests such as Police Day, Metallurgical Day, and Tank Day" (Garrels, 2016, p. 16), which immediately gives the story an unmistakable "Soviet-Russian" flavor.

In a similar way, the people from the "solid" Russian middle-class whom Anne Garrels interviewed demonstrate a mixture of "Western" tastes and preferences (they consume Western goods and technologies, get their education in the West and send their children to foreign schools and universities), but at the same time strong anti-Western views: they "harbor resentment, almost an outright hatred of the West" (Garrels, 2016, p. 27). Anne Garrels explains these contradictory sentiments by the search for modern Russian identity: "Russians are trying to figure out who they are and where they fit into the world. They embrace much of Western culture and the selective denial of what doesn't fit into the official "Russian" model seldom makes sense" (Garrels, 2016, p. 26). She criticizes this "Russian" way of blaming others instead of trying to accept responsibility and take care of the tasks at hand. Like Greene and Meier, she is also highly critical of the current political regime as it is becoming "increasingly totalitarian and returning to former dreams of empire" (Garrels, 2016, p. 33).

Russia's ambition to "out-West the West" is depicted in Andrew Meier's passage about the building of the "city of the future" – "Moscow Siti". In the travelogue, the story of this ambitious project is imbued with symbolism as the narrator describes a scene of a young Russian couple looking at the miniature model of this future city with "a set of translucent skyscrapers that burst from the city's heart":

> Like so many of the pilgrims who came to see this model of Moscow, they were eager and hopeful witnesses to the birth of the new Siti. They tried to locate their apartment in the model city, but it spun too fast…
> "Think it'll ever be built?" the elfin girl… asked her companion.
> "No", he replied. "Of course, not" (Meier, 2003, p. 29)

Similarly, attempts of other regions to modernize are presented as bound to failure due to greed and corruption of the authorities and passivity of the locals. This is how Andrew Meier describes Vladivostok:

> In 1992, the locals surveyed their bountiful inheritance – a huge merchant fleet and a cornucopia of timber, fish and furs – and dreamed of becoming a Russian Hong Kong. They envisioned a free economic zone blooming as freighters filled the ports, forming a bridge to the Asian markets close by. …Primorye, no longer a pliant colony of Moscow, said the new optimists, will join arms with the Pacific Rim, and, in a case study of globalization's fruits, arise from its post-Soviet slumber… sadly, a decade after opening up again, Vladivostok still awaited its revival. Instead of a boomtown, the traveler found the corrupt heart of the far eastern frontier, the modern update of the unbridled market that nineteenth-century visitors discovered (Meier, 2003, p. 266)

In the eyes of the Western observer, even the modern look of Russian cities is no more than “window-dressing”. Andrew Meier quotes the opposition reporter Yuliya Latynina:

> “Don’t expect any Renaissance”, she liked to say. Russia had never even seen the Enlightenment. To understand the present morass, she argued, you needed to look only to the Middle Ages (Meier, 2003, p. 358)

All the narrators highlight the fact that they were seeking to interview members of the “young generation” and found them as passive and uninterested in “moving on” as the older generation:

> Zhenia may better fit the mold of a more prevalent young Russian – struggling to get by, satisfied to be near family, educated and familiar with the West but not clamoring to see or be part of it (Greene, 2014, p. 118)

This inability of the country to achieve the desired future and prosperity is explained differently: Greene and Meier share the opinion that it is primarily the inability to deal with the past, the “genetic memory” of the past and the fears haunting the older and younger generations of Russians that prevents them from shaking off their inertia and taking active steps to change the things they dislike:

> People were not taught to raise questions – because doing so could be dangerous, and really there was nowhere to turn for answers anyway. A foundation of Communist ideology and Soviet power was keeping people convinced that they had to accept their fate as it was – and that, in the end, this would be better for everyone. But this philosophy remains in the DNA, passed from one generation to the next, including to a younger one that so far shows little sign of extinguishing it (Greene, 2014, p. 121)

However, as David Greene points out the threat is not entirely unreal:

> What a strange purgatory Russians live in. For so many years they could not travel freely and took a major risk if they wrote or said anything critical of the government or anyone well connected… Today many of those restrictions are gone. Life is more free and open. And yet the fear remains. The risk remains. In a way, maybe clear limits of toleration are less fearsome than erratic limits of toleration. Uncertainty about being punished is more intimidating than certainty (Greene, 2014, p. 247)

As for Anne Garrels, she sees the cause of the problem in the “identity crisis” of the Russian people “over where their country fits into the overall global scheme” (Garrels, 2016, p. 187) combined with their “belief in their rightful place in the world”, “rooted in their turbulent history” (Garrels, 2016, p. 27):

> The Soviet identity was in many ways an artificial construct, but it existed for a long while, and by the time it collapsed, who knew what Russia was or what being Russian meant? It turned out that "Russia" was not all about being democratic and loving freedom, as some might have thought when the Soviet Union collapsed… Now there is a searching, on many fronts, for a definition of what it means to be "Russia" in the twenty-first century (Garrels, 2016, p. 187)

Like the previous two, the third dichotomy – political/personal – also deals with the question of collective and individual autonomy. All the authors point out the perceptible lack of communal feeling and atomization of society. As the state encroaches on the rights of private citizens and increases its control over all spheres of social life, people seem to be satisfied with stoically enduring the hardships, preserving whatever individual freedom they have and not striving for more or trying to unite. This is surprising for a Western observer, who would expect an open protest, especially in blatant cases of social injustice, of which numerous examples are discussed in the texts. The atomization of society results in the lack of grassroots initiatives of any kind, although Anne Garrels takes care to describe several individual "success" stories of human rights and environmental activists and entrepreneurs. These, however, are far outnumbered by stories of once successful people who had to quit their businesses or campaigning because of the joint pressure from corrupt government officials, police and criminals. The virtually non-existent community life makes some respondents look back nostalgically at their life in Soviet communal apartments, in which their neighbours became a kind of "extended family" (Greene, 2014, p. 73).

In the atmosphere of general mistrust and the absence of any close ties within the local community, family remains the only form of close interactions between the people: their struggle with the state and the criminals (which often go hand in hand) begins and ends with the protection of their family. The coldness and alienation of people when in public creates a stark contrast to their warmth and hospitality when at home. David Greene tells the story of the Ural village of Sagra, whose inhabitants "took up hunting rifles and pitchforks on a summer night in July 2011 and defended the community against an approaching criminal gang" (Greene, 2014, p. 171). Not only did the villagers manage to scare away the intruders, but afterwards they also had to fight with the authorities that intended to press charges against them. However, even though the villagers had won both of these fights, to Greene's surprise, Andrei, one of the villagers he befriended, "didn't draw a connection between the battle his village waged and some broader fight for a different future for Russia" and demonstrated the general distrust of public activism and "democratic values" (Greene, 2014, p. 173). Thus, yet another paradox of Russian life is that being aware of the widely spread corruption and social injustice, most of the respondents still voice their preference towards "stability" and "strong leader" over democracy and freedom.

Thus, the dilemma of maintaining individual freedom vs. maintaining order and stability in the country is approached differently by different Russian people. The two figures that can serve as a litmus test in this choice are Vladimir Putin and Joseph Stalin as the embodiments of "strong power" or "strong leaders". As David Greene puts it, "Putin,

popular as ever, shrewd as always, also embodies a Russian soul that is unfamiliar to many in the West" (Greene, 2014, p. 14). In his interviews with Russian people of different social backgrounds, Greene tries to probe into the "secret" of Putin's popularity. After talking to Alexei, a successful US-educated businessman from Novosibirsk, Greene comes to the conclusion that "there's a window into what Putin is managing: something resembling democracy, a system that keeps him in power and makes people such as Alexei … satisfied, happy, and, so far, quiet" (Greene, 2014, p. 252). A similar view is expressed by one of Anne Garrels' respondents, who praises Putin as "a man who will restore the country's industry and its international standing", concluding with the saying: "When there is a fire, you don't ask who the fireman is" (Garrels, 2016, p. 35).

The narrators in all three travelogues seem to be much more mystified not by Putin's popularity, but by the lingering popularity of Joseph Stalin, seen as the notoriously evil dictator in the West. Greene's conversation with Taisiya, an activist for Baikal, gives him a sudden shock when to his question "What's the solution for today's Russia?" she "walks over to her bookcase and pulls out a book. It's called *Generalissimo*" (Greene, 2014, p. 274). Greene concludes this episode by saying:

> I came to visit Taisiya expecting to get a vision toward Russia's future. Here is a woman who has been inspired to take on the government, to challenge power. I am stunned to hear that she – of all people – has Stalin nostalgia. What a reminder of how complicated this Russian puzzle really is (Greene, 2014, p. 275)

Even being aware of the scale of persecutions in the Stalin era (Taisiya admits that "it was very bad"), many people are driven by the nostalgia for "order", believing that all it takes to eradicate corruption, lawlessness and abuse of authority is a truly "strong leader" and "discipline". This sentiment is supported by the rhetoric of the state media ("Putin's spin doctors", as Greene puts it), emphasizing Stalin's military and economic "achievements".

The last but not least, in the dichotomy between the personal and political, it is necessary to consider the environmental question, which is discussed at length by Anne Garrels. Since Soviet times, this has been one of the most sensitive issues of the Urals and the side effect of this region's industrial development. As Garrels points out, Chelyabinsk region has the reputation of "the most contaminated place on the planet" (Garrels, 2016, p. 162). Apart from the major environmental disaster caused by the accident at the plutonium-processing plant "Mayak" (also known in different periods as "Chelyabinsk 40"/"Chelyabinsk 65") and comparable to that in Chernobyl, in the Soviet and post-Soviet period there has been a continuing practice of dumping radioactive waste into the Techa River and Lake Karachay. The exact damage done to the local and regional community and to the environment remains unknown. The environmental activists Garrels interviewed maintained that this practice continued well into the 2000s. To make matters worse, some of the riverside villages, affected by the radiation, were never evacuated and remain there. "Most of those left behind were Bashkir or Tatar – a fact that has led over the years to charges of ethnic genocide" (Garrels, 2016, p. 170). There is an abundance of other examples of criminal negligence

and irresponsible behavior of the regional authorities and industrial enterprises. On the other hand, local communities are afraid to protest for the fear of even greater economic deprivation since shutdown of such enterprises might mean the loss of jobs for many members of these communities.

The alarming trend, according to Garrels, is that "Mayak" is now involved in the reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel from Russian and foreign reactors and there are plans to expand this business while the fate of radioactive waste "remains unclear" as the regional authorities refuse to provide information about the ongoing proceedings and refuse to grant access to the complex to any Russian or international observers and experts (Garrels, 2016, p. 174). The authorities keep a close watch on the few environmental activists and are ready to stifle any dissent should the need arise. Similar to other cases of human rights violations, most of the regional community, though aware of the deteriorating environmental situation, choose not to protest and avoid open confrontations with the government.

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