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A FATHERLESS LAND:

An émigré's view of Russia

This was my eighth trip to Russia since 1990. On my first trip the KGB arrested me as soon as I walked off the plane because my death sentence for escaping Russia in 1962 still remained on the KGB's computer. On each successive trip I coined a different metaphor that would allow me to understand Russia better. Before my first trip I felt like an elderly Jew returning to Auschwitz. I wanted to touch the doors of the oven to make sure that I was indeed alive and that the past was gone forever.

This time I went to accompany my wife on her own nostalgic tour of reunion. She left Russia in 1981 with her family of *refuseniks* and had not returned. Now she wanted to see her relatives and see the new "free" Russia. We took our four-year-old son with us despite my grave reservations. All our friends in Russia and those who had visited Russia recently told us it was perfectly safe.

We flew from Japan with Aeroflot. The flight was forgettable, with its scratchy safety video, stern stewardesses and frequent exhortations not to smoke in the toilets. The few elderly Japanese who flew to Europe via Moscow trying to save a couple of hundred dollars looked apprehensive.

The landing was perfect and the passengers broke into timid but relieved applause, which would prove premature. That very same day at Moscow's second airport Chechen female suicide bombers blew two planes out of the sky. And at the end of "the bloody week" the world would know of the Beslan massacre, the Rizhskaya metro and the bus stop explosions and Russia would be an altered place.

After so many years away I felt I was able to look at new Russia with clear, if not totally detached eyes. I was keen to understand how a former superpower that was endowed with such rich cultural heritage and still relatively abundant natural resources could plummet so quickly to the position of 57th on the UN's "best country to live" scale, sandwiched between Bulgaria and Libya? What does the future hold?

Russians themselves are trying desperately to find a new hook for their changed status. Many solutions abound, from new geopolitical alliances with Europe and China that would isolate and diminish the United States, to dreaming of Russia as a spiritual "Third Rome".

I now see a very different picture of Russia. This vast country is primarily a fatherless land, a land without protection. Since it lost its last father figure – the Tsar (who towards the end became ineffectual anyway) it fell into the hands of psychopathic father-pretenders (Stalin) or outright rogues (Yeltsin), bent on fulfilling their petty ambitions of personal greed and power, oblivious to the larger good. Russia had no de Gaulle or Ben Franklin or Teddy Roosevelt as

important nation-building influencers. Peter the Great came closest to playing a role of a strict father to this vast and unruly nation but may have gone too far too quickly in his Europeanising efforts. Indeed, some historians believe he inadvertently pushed Russia back into its own reactionary lair that later proved a fertile ground for Russian communism.

To many Russians now, Putin seems as good as it comes. His continual promises of stability (as hollow as they may sound to an outsider) are a balm to the traumatised national psyche that survived a coup, an attack on the parliament, and a monetary default within a few years. Of course, the Russians should know by now that stability built on lies is a prelude to chaos. But many do not care to know, enjoying the rare “*peredyshka*” (a breathing space) far more welcome than the proverbial *perestroika*.

Putin was of course an appointee of Yeltsin, who presided over the pillaging of Russia that saw its remaining resources disappear into the pockets of a few wily tycoons. His recent attempts to rein in the oligarchs seem belated and half-hearted, given the size of the problem. He now heads a terror-stricken country that resembles a giant flea market where the remaining oil and gas reserves are traded for Western trinkets.

The flea market is huge and it is controlled by the various mafias who bribe the officialdom to operate with impunity. Western manufacturers, despite the payoffs to the mafias and the bureaucrats, must be overjoyed. It seems that the dream of every Russian consumer is to suck on a bottle of Warsteiner beer while walking in Nike shoes and talking to someone on a clamshell Samsung 3-G phone. The famed GUM store in Moscow is now a playground for the rich, with expensive foreign brands trying to outprice one another. The Russian consumer, starved by 70-odd years of communist deprivation has gone berserk. The oil and gas money (with oil at its peak price right now) trickles down the trophic chain, enriching a pyramid of resellers and stifling any attempt by the Russians to revive their stagnant manufacturing industries. Why start your own business and be subject to tax hounds’ raids and bureaucrats’ whims when a quick bribe can secure a reselling franchise that is already fully protected? Even the traditional Russian pancakes (blinis) are made in smart little kiosks staffed by bright youngsters on equipment licensed from abroad.

The cities are littered with booths in which you can buy anything, from pirated DVD movies to computer software, to songs and encyclopaedias. This business is worth hundreds of millions of dollars annually. No one in his right mind pays the full price for anything. Some producers have even put out cheap “pirated” versions of their own products to get at least a share of the market.

Business is good for enterprising foreigners with few qualms, for Russian bribe-taking bureaucrats and for a minority of Russians who have the right mind set, skills and connections. The rest are sliding further into poverty. Even for the rich, it is not simple. You have to watch your back constantly. A relative told me a story of a stooge who was planted in his company by competitors to spy on his trade contacts. The stooge sold access to company’s database to its rivals. The company was just to stay afloat in order to provide the competition with valuable leads. He estimates that he has lost hundreds of thousands of dollars as a result of this scam.

Another relative who lives abroad bought an apartment at an auction in St. Petersburg. At first, she thought it was a real bargain. But between the exchange of contracts and taking possession of the property, the apartment was stripped of everything that could be stolen – central heating elements, ceiling ornaments, even the parquet floors. Bailiffs who were supposed to guard the property committed the theft. The new owner simply refurbished the flat at her own expense, afraid of lengthy and potentially futile court proceedings.

The graft and corruption reach up to the highest levels of society. I was driven by a dacha near Moscow that belongs to Alexander Pochinok, the former minister in charge of tax collection.

The dacha resembled a rural Kremlin, with huge stonewalls enclosing luxurious buildings within. Locals complained that the sewage from these luxury dachas was flowing into the ponds and rivers but confessed their powerlessness to stop it. Such multi-million dollar complexes could not have been built solely on the government official's \$3,000 a month salary. Graft on such scale happens when there is a system of mutual cover-up and connivance at the highest level.

I was told stories of doctors routinely collecting bribes from patients to conduct operations, of ministerial posts sold to the highest bidder using a system of "hire purchase", with the minister later repaying his sponsors, of bank clerks passing soiled or even forged banknotes to their customers, of murders and staged traffic accidents involving businessmen and officials who happened to block the way of some powerful individuals. Even essential services are not safe. Mail gets opened, parcels stolen, phone conversations tapped, and registered mail destined for abroad simply dumped at a local garbage dump.

Undoubtedly, the roots of this rampant corruption go back to the Soviet times. In the past, the Soviet state had a monopoly on crime. Under Yeltsin, it was privatised. It spread like a bushfire in the new climate of lawlessness and permissiveness. The former KGB cadres, the guardians of the Soviet system of party privileges, became the guardians of the system of privileges for the New Class of super-rich businessmen, oligarchs and bureaucrats, all the while talking of Russian state's interests. Many of the KGB active cadres and reservists maintain networks that span government and security agencies, private security firms and big businesses, creating a safety ring of steel for themselves and their partons that would make the father of the KGB, old "iron" Felix Dzerzhinsky green with envy.

On an earlier trip I witnessed the statue of Felix pulled down from its pedestal in Moscow's Lubyanka Square by a joyous mob. This time I witnessed the statue being restored in the city of Dzerzhinsk, the city itself renamed back after its infamous patron. This was a telling symbol of a schizoid split that pervades contemporary Russian consciousness. The Russians are enjoying the fruits of the flea market capitalism while hankering after the safety and predictability of the Soviet system.

The speed and magnitude of the recent changes overwhelmed the capacity of the average Russian to digest them. People have retreated into escapist literature, foreign holidays they can ill-afford, family loyalties, bizarre spiritual cults and health fads – in fact anything that would prevent them from acknowledging the roots of the national malaise and their own complicity or impotence. After the Beslan massacre rumours abounded about foreign conspiracies that supposedly facilitated the jihadists' actions. The government and the press fanned the rumours to hide authorities' own incompetence and guilt.

When did the rot set in? After my first trip in 1990 I thought Russia looked less like a country ripe for perestroika and more like a building about to collapse. It needed demolition and salvage experts, not Harvard-educated economists, to guide it through that turbulent stage. Morally, it looked like a derelict orphanage in need of a good foster parent.

Unfortunately, there was no capable leader available for the job. This failure of leadership has had a far-reaching legacy and it can only be understood by recalling the destruction wrought by the upheaval of the Revolution and ensuing decades of Communist insanity. Through the systematic and wholesale annihilation of many of its best talents, the great minds and hearts of the nation, Russia robbed itself of a viable future. Anyone who would support the mad dictator was persecuted. Tens of millions of people perished or were exiled abroad. At the top, only the mediocre and the obedient survived the relentless Stalinist purges. So it's not surprising that at its moment of trial Russia was left with a garrulous but incompetent Gorbachev and the drunken and knavish Yeltsin.

Today, as disappointment with Putin grows, some are even talking of Zhirinovsky's renewed popularity. This consummate opportunist and wag may yet become the grand illusionist of a failed nation.

Just as successful flea markets ultimately turn into orderly rows of shops Russia itself may ultimately become predominantly owned by foreign interests, with bureaucrats and mafias maintaining a token share. Gradually, the foreign-owned factories will be built on Russian soil to supply the shops, to employ locals and thus prevent social unrest, as well as to simplify the logistics of supply and distribution. Putin's centralising reforms and increasing powers of the security apparatus, fuelled by the largely self-created terrorist threat, will play into the hands of Putin's successor who will consolidate the stranglehold over the nation. Russians who clamoured for the protection of a father might well find themselves under the relentless gaze of Big Brother instead.

Russia's psychologically fatherless, cynical, culturally uprooted youth are either making blinis under licence or living in a virtual world of spurious freedom that is more like a mirror image of their communist past (no wonder they are now reverting to wearing the symbols of the communist era as a badge of dissidence and a new high fashion). The more conformist, career-minded ones are paying tens of thousands of dollars to bribe lecturers/tutors at prestigious universities to pass entrance exams, to guarantee themselves a seat on the government bureaucracy gravy train.

The Russian Orthodox Church, instead of being the conscience of the nation, became the handmaiden of the rich and powerful, itself a multinational corporation in its spread and holdings. What else could it become after decades of communist persecution and ideological self-mutilation?

Is there scope for a middle ground scenario? Could the hope lie with the growing middle class that may finally tire of living with internally and externally imposed terror? Could Russia, in a couple of generations, become at least as successful as Argentina? It has excellent journalists and writers that could become the new Salman Rushdies of the world literature (look at what Makin's done in French!). Its talented musicians, artists and sports persons will continue to shine at home and abroad. Its computer hackers could become the new web weavers of a gentler, more benign global village. Its public consciousness could mature (remember, Russia had its Parliament for 10 years while England had it for 700).

But for this to occur the middle class must be allowed to form and prevail. The rest of the industrialised world would need to build more sound, less self-serving and exploitative bridges to the new Russia.

Right now, it all seems such a terrible waste. The world is too busy with the terrorist menace to worry about Russia's fate. Yet in future Russia may well impact more negatively on the world stage. Imagine if a xenophobic "Third Rome" got a new Caligula as an emperor or envisage a Zhirinovsky with a few rusty missiles in his clammy hands as the next bogeyman. Or, more realistically, imagine how the next big terror attack on Russia will help Putin or his successor turn Russia into a police state that will make Brezhnev's Soviet Union look comparatively benign. Combine this with China's rising appetite for secure resources to fuel its economic dominance struggle and you have a scenario that can keep Pentagon planners awake into the night.

The world can probably do very little to change Russia; but we must at least try to understand it.