

Russia the Frustrated Beast

‘Having had my memories and thoughts about America printed and sent copies to friends over the ocean (*America the Benevolent Beast*) I have decided, as a follow up, to tackle Russia. For the essence of the America book was coming to terms with the effect this world presence has had on me as a citizen and individual. We have all been touched by the USA, in my case much, as I had studied and worked there, and was even married for a while to an American. I was born In Hungary and have lived for sixty-five years in England but the effect of these two countries on me were not as world presences on my horizon but as the places of my cultural, professional, and personal history, the day-to-day existence’. America and Russia have loomed as huge clouds, letting the sun beam through the gaps or cast dark shadows or blast storms when they chose. This is an unfair coupling of two countries –the superpowers of our times, for America has been the benevolent presence, Russia the opposite, but not quite!

2022

This is how I started this piece before the Russian invasion of Ukraine that has changed our view of a country that still carried the kudos of having played a critical part in the defeat of Nazi Germany. But now it has become an indiscriminate destroyer of lives. The beast has become literally that; whilst previously it was a world presence, now it has reverted to the ‘regardless of bloodshed mode’ of the Soviet Union. The giveaway was the sight in the news of a Russian tank racing forward in a column, red flag complete with hammer and sickle flapping from its turret. Putin was brought up in Soviet times and has retained its mindset except where it suited him. From his atheist Soviet belief, he quickly reverted to the Orthodox Church. Now he prays and bows his head to the patriarch. Both are just two-faced hypocrites, not having said a word about this war against a country that posed no risk to their own. I had better stop, as I have a lot to say about Russia, a country I have had some sympathy for but am now doubly disappointed every time I see interviews with people in the streets of Moscow approving what their army is doing in Ukraine. Are they ignorant or nationalistic to the point of whatever Mother Russia does must be right?

1945-56

My very first experience of Russia was when her soldiers came as liberators to Hungary at the end of the war. They came down into the underground shelter where my mother and I survived for eight weeks until the end of the siege of Budapest in early February 1945 (the last member of Wehrmacht clambered out of a manhole with his hands up on 13th February in

Buda Castle). These Russian soldiers were well fed and had the confident bearing of victors. The officer with them asked if there were any children amongst our dithering lot. When we, the few children, were ushered forward he ordered a slim long wooden box to be brought down. One of the soldiers yanked off its top to reveal a long colourless brick-like substance wrapped in wax paper. It was the first time I ever saw and tasted quince. The officer sliced it up for us children; there was strictly none for the adults who were a mix of those in hiding, simply residents when the siege started or Hungarian fascists who tried to melt in (hoping to the end that the German miracle weapon would materialise) ¹. The sweet sour taste on the tongue of that quince has stayed with me ever since, thanks to you Russia! It was a simple gesture but what better way to win over the young of a beaten enemy. But then a few weeks later, after we had left *Kettőskereszt útca* (street) where the shelter was, Russian soldiers banged one night on the boarded-up entry door, the housekeeper's pregnant wife went to answer with her little boy on one arm, but she would not let them in. At that, the soldiers shot through the door killing the woman, but somehow the child survived. These were the two sides of the Russian Army, a mix of occasional kindness and ruthless force. My mother's best friend, a shapely sexy woman, became a widow when a Russian soldier tried to rape her. The husband ran to the rescue, whereupon a struggle ensued ending in him being shot in the leg and dying from gangrene a few weeks later. One of the things we learnt from the soldiers was swearing in Russian, something really foul involving mothers, I still know it by heart.

By 1949, the communist takeover of Hungary was complete and the short-lived post-war democracy came to an end. Communism, the Soviet utopia of the October Revolution, gradually took hold in Hungary. There was an initial period after the war when the Russians tried to win over minds and stomachs. Even as a child, I remember gorging on caviar. Suddenly the shops were full of this most expensive, luxurious delicacy, but it only lasted a few months. It was a feint and by 1950 severe, unforgiving Stalinist dictatorship took over forcing a country that had always looked west, having to face east for cultural inspiration. From one week to the next, English, as the foreign language in schools, was replaced with Russian. The teachers were barely keeping ahead of the pupils learning the Cyrillic alphabet. Capitalism, indeed, all private enterprise was abolished. Everything - even newspaper kiosks - now belonged to the communally-owned state. Our factory was nationalised. My mother, instead of being the widow of a capitalist, now had to work as a lowly clerk. Saying lowly of course tells of my bourgeois upbringing. All of working age had to have a job, there was no such thing as being unemployed.

Stalin's portrait was everywhere, represented either as the moustachioed czar or in the row of holy of holies quintet: Marx-Engels-Lenin-Stalin, Rákosi, the head of the Communist

¹ Hungary declared war on Russia on 21 June 1941, one of many insane miscalculations of those in charge of the country. Another miscalculation was declaring war on the USA after Pearl Harbour.

party in Hungary bringing up the rear. A statue of Stalin, eight meters high, was erected in one of the principal avenues of the city. In a supposedly egalitarian society, this was the cult of personality on a scale that would have shamed Nero. Forget the scouts with their English origin, now we were pioneers with red scarfs around our necks but still tied with leather woggles. The manual workers were suddenly elevated to directing factories and running communal farms purely on the basis of being proletarians or peasants. Their expertise was secondary, no longer a matter of ability but of having belonged to the right class to manage; turning things upside down is what the October revolution was all about and it was enforced brutally. All of these fundamental changes could only be imposed because the Soviet Army, by now back in barracks, was still in the country ostensibly to protect us from the capitalist west but really to make certain we lived by the political system of the Soviet Union. Marx prescribed communism as 'the dictatorship of the proletariat', but he overlooked Lord Acton's dictum that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. In no time, the party functionaries were swooping through town in curtained limousines, taking over the grand houses previously occupied by aristocrats and capitalists but now state owned. They had their own shops where western goods could be obtained that were no longer available to the ordinary citizen. Security personnel guarded their holiday resorts. Loyalty through dependence on the pyramid of power ensured that the overbearing state could function, an essential feature of any dictatorship. The populace soon looked upon all this with cynicism.

Under the strictest Stalinist regime, from 1950-53, everything was not only censored but spoon-fed to show the world through Red eyes. The West was bad, really bad, so anything allowed had to show it up as decadent, heartless, exploitive, the enemy. Hence in the cinemas *Oliver Twist* was capitalist heartlessness; a 1950 English film in which the main character is buried in concrete, exploitive of the working classes; and the French *Chlochémerle*, decadence. One day, unexpectedly, we were given a morning off, so my whole class set off eagerly to see the film. The pissoir, the mayor, the Marseilles sung at the opening were hilarious but then came the bedroom scene. The protagonist with heavy moustache is putting on his tie, the camera slowly pans to a mirror reflecting a woman naked in bed with round, white breasts. Instant fantasizing! Another French film we were allowed to glow over was *Fanfan La Tulipe*, a swashbuckling French film with Gerard Philippe and to top it all the wonderful panorama of Gina Lollobrigida's cleavage. G P stands on top of a haystack, G L asks '*what is the view like*', G P replies: '*I see a valley between two round hills*'. Well, that sounded witty in 1951. Looking back, the film must have had some connection with the French communist party. Sure enough, searching, I find that the director was in the Jury of the First Moscow International Film Festival. Glimpses of the west depended on such twisted connections.

An especially odious act was confiscating the homes of the old ruling classes. At twenty-four hours notice families who had lived in the same house or apartment for generations

were packed onto lorries with just a few possessions and dumped into chicken coops in far-away villages as their next abode. The confiscated property was then given to supporters and security personnel of the regime as a reward for their unquestioning support. No doubt this was explained away as something the old exploitive owners deserved. This so jarred even in communist Hungary that after six months it was given up. My mother and I, remnants of capitalism, living in a finely designed modern flat, were getting ready to be the next subjects for such dispossession. In the evenings we took some items to relatives to save them just in case. But it seems that doing this to a war widow must have raised eyebrows, saving us. We were somehow left in peace. Life was pretended compliance outside, waving flags, clapping, marching but, behind closed doors, naively, hoping for the collapse or at least softening of the regime.

The Achilles heel of communism was abolishing competition that drove capitalism, the sense of enterprise of taking risks to produce wealth, unequally, yes, but even the lowest stratum of society benefits from it. It was said, in jest, that what brought communism to an end was its inability to produce a better refrigerator than the capitalist west. For us, under the Soviet regime, the West only existed beyond barbed wire borders; no travel was allowed and nor was anything imported from the vile “capitalist” countries. The second-rate goods turned out from local factories were the only ones for sale, if available at all. Long queues outside shops became part of the street scene. And all the time the party propaganda machine was telling us it was for an ideal communist future, ‘but comrades we have only reached socialism yet – have patience’. For now, following Lenin’s dictum, the main aim was building up heavy industry whether it made economic sense did not come into it.

Communism as an ideology did have its own appeal in the idea of the fairness of levelling, the evening-out of contribution versus consumption. Education and medical care were now freely available to all. Communism’s true followers, some of whom were dormant before the war, could now come into their own, building a new ideal future thanks to the October Revolution in 1917², after which, against all the odds this ideology took hold. Loyalties to families and friends were not allowed to come between members and what the Party demanded. The communist dogma was enforced by these true believers and the opportunists present in any society who will do whatever is necessary to advance themselves. If the only way to get a flat was to tell on suspect colleagues or study Marx Engels Lenin and Stalin during long evenings, so be it. Living under absolute rule no doubt came easier to the mass of Russians who previously lived under the tzar when dissent or free thought sent them to Siberia. But even in less than liberal pre-war Hungary this was an extreme, something that had to be endured. The now side-lined middle and upper classes became despised members of a

² November in the Orthodox calendar

reactionary, exploitive past. Stepping out of line could be fatal. There was the tyranny of show trials where previously loyal communist party members suddenly became traitors admitting how they had tried to undermine the communist system. All of it rehearsed after months of torture, beatings, deprivation of sleep³. Dictatorships always have to mount huge displays of loyalty, so we had organised 'enthusiastic' marches on anniversaries connected with the victories of the communist system! My ex-capitalist mother had to take part with her work colleagues carrying flags, sing the praises of leaders in unison watched over by party functionaries for the level of enthusiasm.

These were the shadows of Russia in my teenage years⁴. Still there were the occasional treats to cheer us up. My mother obtained tickets to the National Opera where I saw Galina Ulanova dance in *Swan Lake*, something I recount whenever there is an excuse to show off about it. Hungary had outstanding successes in sporting events especially in football and water polo, we could all bask in the reflected glory of winning, even beating the Russians. But all the time the overbearing presence of Russia was felt. A small, defeated country simply could not be trusted to decide its own future so Hungarian communist party leaders regularly crawled to Moscow to get the nod for whatever it was they wished to introduce, who to put on trial, how to toe the line. Students who were sent to Moscow to study came back complaining of humiliation at the hands of Russian students for being from an underling country.

When Stalin died suddenly in March 1953 we knew, even before the official announcement, from the funeral music played on the radio that something serious had happened. My school class was ordered to march to Stalin's bronze statue to pay our respects, but the authorities could not manage an orderly procession at such short notice so to our relief, and secret giggles, it was cancelled. The true party members cried on street corners during the five-minute silence that was ordered throughout the whole country. Three hundred of those who repeated an untranslatable joke about Comrade Stalin's demise were jailed. Then the photo was published of Soviet leaders standing guard by his coffin. The line-up from the front was an indication of the power struggle in the Kremlin. Almost immediately there was a mild relaxation of the regime, not by much, but the big stick was no longer a threat to the communist party leadership. The regime though was still incapable of compromise because dictatorships can only survive with absolute rule. Now, though, there were rising expectations of a better life, openings to the west where everything was better, cars, fridges, everything. The so-called social justice of communism was to take a back seat and anyway the party cadres were

³ As in *Darkness at Noon* by Arthur Koestler.

⁴ I expounded about what Stalin meant in a previous wondering of the mind, *Stalin's Knee*, that can be read on my website: www.sandorpvaci.com/Writings.

corrupting themselves with privileges, just as Putin's inner circle has done, building up to deeply felt resentment. It all had to come to a head.

On 23rd October 1956 the revolution broke out resulting in an armed struggle between the revolutionaries fighting alongside the Hungarian Army, which quickly sided with its own, and the Russian occupying forces. Young Russian soldiers died fighting a country that they thought was a friend, at least that was the propaganda they were fed on. It was all over after twelve days once the failing Russian units were replaced by others who were told: you are going to fight the capitalist west over the Suez Canal (yes, naively they looked for palm trees on the banks of the Danube). By chance, or intuition, I was present in the critical places where the Revolution started: on the evening of the 23rd outside Parliament then later on in the street of the National Radio station. Shots were fired. Next day, the contents of the Communist Party's bookshop were burnt in a pile. On the 25th unarmed demonstrators were massacred and from then on there was no way back. Stalin's bronze statue was felled on the very first afternoon of the Revolution. Only his boots remained to remind us of where he used to stand. His torso was dragged next to the National Theatre in the middle of town, his head was severed. I found his headless body in a side street where I set about sawing off a part of his patella, a trophy that was with me all the way to England. Members of the secret service were hunted down, some lynched. Hundreds died and graves were dug in public squares. It was a real war that the Russians could not afford to lose and the West, as now in Ukraine, would not get involved in. Contain them, yes, but not fight them has been the principle of the Cold War. It showed up the Soviet Union as yet another imperialist power, something from which the European communist parties never recovered.

The 1956 Revolution was the greatest event in my personal history and allowed me to come to England, something that changed my life for good, opening up myriad possibilities. It was up to me whether I succeeded or failed, no dogma, just enterprise. My first-hand experience of Soviet communist dictatorship gave me a better understanding about world events and politics ever since.

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A few years ago, I wrote a play about the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Its main twist was how a Russian tank crew would have experienced fighting Hungarians who wanted their country back. *No Neat Endings* was performed as a reading, had lots of compliments but now it is lying in a drawer with a very faint hope of making it to the stage. Thinking back, it was probably too sympathetic to the poor bloody Russian soldiers who were under strict military command. Indeed now, one wonders what is going through the minds of Russian soldiers as they obliterate the homes of Ukrainian citizens? What is the strict obedience of a soldier's mind? How do they become mindless robots, ignorant of rights and wrongs who simply kill to order and are willing to be killed themselves? At the end of the play the commander of the

tank, who was from Voronezh (south of Moscow), has this to say as an epilogue after the fall of communism:

What has happened to my beloved, rejected, bullying Russia? European, but not quite. Don't we have the same Doric columns on our theatres? Aren't our classical music, ballet and literature part of the European ethos? Are we not the spiritual guardians of Byzantium? Still, we get attacked and in turn subdue nations weaker than us. In public we are an unsmiling hard lot who cannot show weakness or tolerate dissent.'

Do the current Russian soldiers recognise that those they kill in Ukraine are the real heroes?

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1956-1997

Perhaps it is frustration that drives Russia at the lack of appreciation of having defeated the two dictators Western Europe let loose on their country, Napoleon and Hitler. Stalin belatedly realised in WW II that Russians shall sacrifice themselves not for communism but to save *Mother Russia*. To explore the enigma of the Russian character, what makes them tick, I followed up what the supreme female genius of the 18th/19th century wrote on her travels there in 1812. Baroness de Staël-Holstein's observations were published after her death by her son in 1821 under the title: *Ten Years' Exile* which included an extensive journey through Russia. During her stay in Petersburg (no St then) she wrote that the nobility is: *Accustomed to be the absolute masters of their peasants, they wish the monarch, in his turn, to be omnipotent, for the purpose of maintaining the hierarchy of despotism*. This tells me that living under absolute rule had been the existence of Russians whatever class they occupied all the way up to the czar who was later replaced by the General Secretary of the Communist Party, Comrade Stalin, with the same power. Now Vladimir Putin is the dictator, just like Stalin was, even if without the gulag. Why democracy, the way we understand it in the west, has never taken root in Russia is the question confronting anyone trying to understand a people who are never dull, have great achievements but somehow can only be governed by absolutism. Why can't they accept a different point of view without sinking into anarchy, for it is the fear of that, I suspect, that makes Russians accept the rule of despots. What is it about Russia's character that over history she has failed to fulfil her potential? Here is a country with the largest landmass of any whose gross national product is just one fourteenth that of the United States! Perhaps what Staël-Holstein observed is just deeply imbedded, but who will ever lead them out of it.

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Once I arrived in England and set about fitting in, learning the language and getting used to the myriad ways she was different, Russia receded into the background and only existed in newspaper articles; but was no longer a daily threat. We, Hungarian refugees, who

fled from a country that was under Communist rule the enemy of our new home, were of minor interest for a while. I made a real effort to get away from the suffocating refugee mentality and to my great fortune met at architecture school a ginger Englishman who became a lifelong friend. At his parties, often late into the night, I would show off with my piece of Stalin's patella that is until through my carelessness I lost the precious piece of bronze. With this friend we travelled and one of our destinations was the Brussels World Fair in 1958 and that is where I was made to meet a Russian woman, an encounter I recalled in my *Fragments* (of memory):

"...one of the officials in the British Pavilion (a terrible folded Gothic affair) asked a Russian over to arrange a 'confrontation' with me - the Hungarian refugee from Soviet oppression. But we were timidly polite to each other. We were in the West..."

That was about it until 1970 by which time (in 1961) I had become a loyal subject of the Queen and could visit Hungary under the protection of my hard-cover British passport. I crossed the border yet again, after fourteen years, between Hungary and Austria but now legally. The entry post was guarded by a soldier with a machine gun looking down from a menacing tower; the barrier that swung open was a thick metal tube just in case someone was foolish enough trying to crash through it into the West. Once the barrier was lifted, I sped through in my red English sportscar⁵, what an impression that made! I drove through the villages that had a warm familiarity, the peasant life does not change with regimes for toiling on the land breeds toughness and continuity. Still, this was very much a communist state even if less severe than in the other satellite countries. I met old friends, travelled around, but I was no longer the same. England's civility and liberty was imbedded in me by then and most important of all I could leave thanks to my precious hard cover.

Years passed, I obtained my diploma in architecture, then a Master of Architecture in America. Then worked there for a while in an architectural practice to gain experience. Back in London, I set up my own office and in between I had the great, good the fortune of my life in meet Ildiko who became my wife. Without delay we started a family. I immersed myself in the work of the architectural practice, not much interested in politics. Then the Soviet Union came to an abrupt end in 1991 to the great relief of us all, and no little smirk at how a world power, which had challenged the West since the War just disintegrated by itself. The sixteen states of the federation all became independent states. Russia was once again Russia as before 1917. In 1996, the ginger-haired friend whose wife had contacts organised a group journey to Leningrad that by then had reverted to its former name of St Petersburg. We were a mix of the friend's friends, ex-diplomats, professionals, the simply curious, all eager to see the treasures of the Hermitage and how post-communist Russia was shaping up. In addition, we could arrange to meet Ildiko's Russian pen friend from many years ago.

⁵ A TR4A.

We found that St Petersburg was still in recovery mode from Soviet times. Our group stayed on a Swiss touring ship tied up as a hotel to provide the clean, safe comfortable accommodation that we westerners expected. The Hermitage was of course impressive but behind it was the public square, enveloped by a semi-circular building, where in 1905 unarmed demonstrators were gunned down on the czar's orders. The place for me still had the eerie scent of gore, a massacre that led twelve years later to the end of the monarchy and the rise of another kind of absolutism. That was bloody history but we foreign tourists felt safe in a country on its knees. A meeting was arranged with Russian academics who were embarrassed because we had to sit in our overcoats as they had no money for heating. St Petersburg was very impressive with its canal network, grand architecture and historical monuments, one of which was the battleship Potemkin. We visited the cellar where Rasputin was murdered, all graphically illustrated with wax models. There was also a trip to *Tsarskoye Selo*, yet another palace of czarist grandeur. The Great Ball Room still bore the scars of the war in missing alabaster panels plundered by the retreating Nazis. Coming from Britain, it was good to learn that one wing of the building was designed by a Scottish architect.

We needed all our warm clothes and padded boots in the severe cold; everything was covered in snow. The sea froze solid but that did not deter tough Russians from breaking the ice for a dip and then drying their steaming naked bodies. Ildiko made contact with the penfriend and the visit to their home lifted us out of our tourist comforts into the post-Soviet life of the citizenry. There was no polite queuing getting on the tram, elbowing and shoving was the way. We were quickly out of imperial St Petersburg to the world of Soviet equality with moronic mass housing of identical block after block. We arrived at their address, made our way up in the lift and then were faced with locked iron gates to protect the residents from burglary. Locked doors were simply not strong enough for security. Still, once inside their flat we were greeted with warm Russian hospitality and of course vodka. The penfriend's husband was a doctor who said he was called up when the armies of socialist countries were ordered to put down the Prague Spring in 1968; not that there was any fighting. The Czechs somehow, always, accepted foreign rule rather than fight, quite unlike the Hungarians in 1956. The husband still felt a little ashamed about it, not that he could do anything as a young recruit. At a later date, the penfriend's parents came to town where we invited them for drinks. Here was a couple who had survived the starving siege of Leningrad, a military engagement that was especially cruel on the civilian population. Unfortunately, the language barrier stopped me asking about their experience. They were a lovely smiling couple; I was drawn to them.

The last treat on this first visit to Russia was a ride on a troika pulled by three thickly-furred ponies in the deep snow of a forest, with blankets and vodka to keep us warm. This

was back to tourist mode, rubbing shoulders with Tolstoy. This trip told me a lot about Russia, but the next journey showed me what the real country was like.

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The next exploration to Russia in 2005 was prompted by my completely irrational hope that by going to the Don River I could, somehow, make contact with the spirit of my father who died there during the war in 1942 or 1943 as a forced labourer in the Hungarian Army. There were no records of exactly where or when he perished. I made certain that we travelled to Russia during the winter months to experience the climate my father had to endure.

We flew to Moscow, walked around Red Square; I looked up to the castellated walls of the Kremlin thinking that behind them was decided how people in Hungary were going to live. An apt reminder that absolutism had been the Russian mode of governing their own people as well as others. Still, near St Basil's Basilica we came across a nice, young newlywed couple with their friends; the smiles struggled against the hard background. In the distance loomed the neo-gothic edifice of the Palace of Soviets aka Chicago skyscraper from the twenties. Ironical that whenever the Soviet leaders wanted to show off, they copied, trying to outdo arch-capitalist America. The huge limousines ferrying around the apparatchiks were the size of Cadillacs with snub noses, and the principal buildings, Chicago Tribune style. Stalin detested modernism. In one of the squares stood a fine Bauhaus building, built for *Izvestia*⁶, that lifted my architect's heart. That kind of modernism was soon banished from Soviet architecture and art by Stalin's parochial view about culture.

Soon we were boarding the overnight train for Voronezh, the principal town on the river Don. The Russian train was impressively spacious, thanks to the wide track. We set off in the evening whizzing through a snowstorm. In the middle of the night the train stopped somewhere in the steppe to let the engineers hammer the wheels for any signs of cracks, the endless landscape and the metal twangs making for an unnerving combination. In the morning, we arrived at the Voronezh train station to be welcomed by the couple who were to look after us. We looked around town for a couple of days. In the main square, we stared up at Lenin's statue, his arm pointing to a communist future; on one side was an impressive opera house and in an enclave Pushkin's bust. Next, we hired a people carrier for taking us to the destination of the whole journey: the Second World War battle front that followed the Don River.

This was a two-hundred-kilometre stretch that the II Hungarian Army was entrusted with defending in 1942-43, a part of the front that stretched from Leningrad to Stalingrad. Oddly, or maybe a clever ploy by the Soviet commanders, the Soviet Army held both sides

⁶ Communist party newspaper founded in 1917.

of the river throughout. In January 1943, the Red Army broke through having already obliterated the Nazis at Stalingrad. From then on it was a matter of how soon they would reach Berlin (another two years of bloody, murderous battles). The Hungarian Army after the breakthrough was in such bad shape that they were ordered to withdraw but by then my father had met his end and I never for a moment felt any closer to him. Although I failed in my endeavour, the whole enterprise was well worthwhile as we saw a part of Russia that no tourist, even Russian tourists, ever visits. We soon found at Rudkino the Hungarian military memorial to their dead. This consisted of granite slab after granite slab with the names of those who were recorded dead, alas not that of my father. There was a large cross, and a Jewish Menorah, all symbols of lives lost in the pointlessness of war, a foreign field was their last call.

We also visited villages: Ivanonka, Kotoryak, Kostenky and others I have not recorded. The abject poverty was beyond our western, even East European, imagination. Log-cabin houses on either side of a road, no shops, nowhere to eat, no nothing. After the collapse of the Soviet Union those who managed the kolkhoz, the collective agricultural units, sold off the machinery and pocketed the money. These rural oligarchs left the workers without any means of tilling the thousands of acres. Their only way of obtaining food was growing whatever they could in their backyards. We came across an old sunken-cheeked toothless woman, asked her some question through our interpreter and gave her some money, at which she grabbed my hand and kissed it to my great embarrassment. I have never seen such want and was very touched by it, even feeling guilty of our own comfort. This was real Russia, at least in 2005, outside the towns. Now, with my 2022 mind, if Putin were a real patriot, he would have tackled rural poverty instead of spending billions on armaments. But then dictators are not known for their social consciences, and certainly not this one. The muzhiks always come off worse.

Returning to Voronezh we suffered another uncomfortable incident that proved the Soviet mentality had not died with the Union. We came across a large food hall with a balcony running around it where we could have coffee. The hall was packed with delicacies that would have put to shame any such in a western capital. I was so impressed that I started taking photographs to show friends back in London how well the Russians were doing now. But I was stopped in my tracks; a plain clothed security man got hold of my elbow and ushered me, Ildiko following, to an office. There an officer sat glumly at a table under his fur cap still with its red star. The security man told him, Ildiko could understand some Russian, that I, the foreigner, had taken pictures of the hall, great security risk to the state! I explained, while already thinking how I could contact the British Embassy for help, how

impressed I was: oranga, banana harashaow harashaw (good in Russian). The fur cap looked at my passport, shook his head handing it back and waved us away. Not the best way to attract foreign tourists but I think they could not care less. Russia since then retreated for me into what I gleaned from newspapers and the television, that is until it invaded Ukraine two months ago.

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This is an account of Russia as I see it; a Russia always at the extremes of dictatorship, regardless of the suffering caused to others or themselves. Does morality ever come into her consideration when destroying homes in Ukraine? Russia historically can boast great cultural achievements but it remains a huge, frustrated entity on the world stage that poses dangers to humanity, something insufficiently appreciated. A country to be wary of even if never forgetting Tchaikovsky.

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