An Academic Visit to Russia

Joseph Carroll

I recently spent a week in Russia, with one day in Moscow and the rest of the time at an academic conference in Perm, an industrial city in the Urals, the most eastern part of European Russia. The Russians are struggling to emerge into the modern world of liberal politics and cosmopolitan intellectual exchange. The transition is awkward, often painful, and by no means certain in its outcome. The conference I attended, on aesthetics and creativity, had about it an air of unintentional black comedy, and its more grotesque features suggest some of the difficulties the Russians face in trying to escape from the distorting effects of their own political history.

Moscow and Perm are both relatively prosperous cities. Taking them as a standard, one could reasonably conclude that everything in Russia is old, dirty, cheap, and unbelievably shabby. Apartment buildings were constructed decades ago out of the flimsiest and ugliest materials and then left utterly to rot, along with the people in them. If tiles or facings fall off buildings, they are not replaced. In parks and along sidewalks, the dandelions riot in luxuriant abandon. Window panes are cracked and dirty, and windowsills are left unpainted to face the debilitating effects of Russian winters. The air is foul, and visitors are warned not to drink the water. Russian residential districts look like third-world slums. But Russia has immense resources, both human and material, and one has a feeling that Russia is still somehow a major industrialized nation. They have always produced their own munitions, and even under capitalist competition they have managed to sustain their own domestic auto industry. (The Lada, a basic economy car, is widely used.)

Russian shabbiness has its specifically economic causes, no doubt, but it probably also has causes in the political history and social psychology of the Russians. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, the government took responsibility for everything. No one was allowed to take individual initiative, and the Russian people seem to have gotten out of the habit of taking care of their own property.

When one asks about the difference between the present and the period before 1990, the Russians often speak as if life was much better back then.

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"Everyone was secure. We knew the government would take care of us—jobs, health care, education. We did not have to worry about anything, and we were all equal." All equally poor, oppressed, and paralyzed intellectually and politically, but the Russians don't seem to look at it in that light. The only reason the Soviet Union collapsed, it seems, is that the shops were empty. The economy just up and quit. The government could not supply the basic goods and services for which it had taken responsibility.

I spoke with a middle-aged tour guide who told me that during Glasnost she was one of the first Russians to be sent to America as "citizen diplomats." She had been astonished at what she saw in America. The Soviet government had been highly successful in shutting out information about conditions outside the Soviet Union. Many Russians thus had no idea that they were poor and oppressed. Russia was all they knew, and they assumed that it was not only normal but exemplary. Speaking of the period before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the tour guide used a phrase that I also heard other Russians use. "We trusted our government."

The Russians I talked to did not seem acutely aware that they are in the midst of a transition from a police state to a free society. One reason for their ideological indifference might be that for decades the people who cared about freedom of thought and action were systematically murdered or imprisoned. Another factor is that while the government is now less oppressive, it is wantonly corrupt. One young woman told me that her brother had spent two years doing compulsory service in the army and that his diet had included no meat. Government officials steal the money for army food and terrorize the soldiers into keeping silent about it.

The Russians are now free to travel inside Russia, and the ambitious young people from the countryside congregate in major cities like Moscow (11,000,000) and in regional centers like Perm (1,000,000). Many of those young people have put real Russian discipline into their personal appearance. The foreigners at the conference remarked on the fact that virtually all the young Russian women they saw were fit and trim. They wear skin-tight clothing, especially jeans, and perfect makeup (the consumer industry has recovered that far). Visiting a regional park during a holiday, I saw crowds of fashionable young women vibrating with social animation while strolling through weed-choked lanes and stepping with athletic poise around mud holes and crumbling pavements.

The young people still don't have many opportunities, and they are restless and dissatisfied. There is everywhere in Perm a perpetual steady drumbeat of hard-driving, pulsating, hypnotic rock—a blend of Russian folk music and American heavy metal. It seems designed as a drug to provide an artificial sense of drive and thus to mask the frustration and discontent.

At the conference, the invited foreign speakers were all provided with their own translators—young women from the local pedagogical institute specializ-

ing in English. I talked to several translators, and they all wanted to work for travel agencies or be otherwise involved in tourism, so that they could move about. I asked one of the translators if she did not feel she had more freedom now, and she said yes, sort of, but to make use of it you need money, and there is still no money, except for the few filthy rich. (The big new money comes mainly from oil.) The masses of people remain very poor.

Still, things are in motion. Seeing the gap between Russian conditions and Russian potential, one thinks that surely, eventually, the Russians will wake up, look around, and start to make their own opportunities. I spent some time with an Israeli couple, a scholar and his wife, and while visiting a regional fair in a town outside of Perm, it occurred to me that if this were Israel, you wouldn't see energetic young people out dancing and laughing and singing amidst the weeds and decay. They'd organize work squads and clean up the squalor, and then think about having a party to celebrate that.

Despite the ugliness of it all, I found the Russian people fascinating and often attractive. The translators were all gracious, polite, and elaborately well-mannered. One sensed that they were putting on a tightly controlled performance, a smile held in tension that included the necessity of never letting the tension show. The translators took some of us to a production of *Swan Lake* in Perm, and it occurred to me that the translators were like the ballet dancers—operating under high tension but struggling, usually successfully, to make it look graceful and easy. My own translator was an intelligent, quick young woman with a good heart and a sly sense of humor. She has never been outside of Russia, or even outside the Perm region, but her English was fluent, precise, and even idiomatic. She told me that her sister is entering an institute for architectural design. Perhaps in ten or 15 years young people like this will have made major changes in the social and economic climate of Russia.

The central shaping event in the Russian historical imagination is neither the Bolshevik Revolution nor the collapse of the Soviet Union. The central historical event for them is the Second World War. For the Americans, World War Two was only a strenuous expeditionary effort. For the Russians, it was a life-and-death struggle, fought largely on Russian soil, at the cost of some 20 million Russian lives. The Russians recently celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the war in Europe, and there were big wreaths on the public monuments and in the cemeteries.

In the central park in Perm (weed-choked, of course), there is a large statue from the post-war era, with three figures, all triple life size—a laborer on one side, a soldier on the other, and a woman in the middle. The soldier is holding up a sword, defiantly, and he and the woman both are holding a shield. The aesthetics are touchingly crude, devised along the same lines as the statue of Marshal Zhukov outside of Red Square. Zhukov is astride a horse—a perch not particularly suitable for directing armored divisions along fronts stretching for hundreds of miles. And soldiers in the Second World War had little use

for shields and swords. But despite the comical inappropriateness of the conventionalized imagery, the statue in Perm was to me deeply moving. My translator was only 21 and vague about history within the past few decades, but she was acutely aware of World War Two. She showed me the statue, and I asked whether the woman in the middle was a nurse. "No," she said, "she is a mother, of soldiers."

The conference I attended reflected the imperfect nature of the transition from the Soviet era. The opening ceremonies featured deans and other administrators giving welcoming speeches. They looked like Soviet-era bureaucrats, which is exactly what they were. They were middle-aged and older, and thus the sort of people who were able to survive and attain positions of power within the old Soviet academic system—heavy, stolid, utterly graceless in manner and demeanor. The Russian lecturers whose presentations I heard spoke in a mumbling monotone, making not the slightest effort to make contact with their audience. Applause from the audience was scarcely even perfunctory, but the Russians didn't seem to register that anything was amiss in all this. They have apparently spent their academic lives going through the motions, and expect nothing else.

The conference was organized for comfort and convenience, so far as the logistics went, but the imagination that organized it had never envisioned it as an intellectual and social exchange. The invited speakers were all scheduled to speak one after another, and the symposia were scheduled at the same time as the invited talks. The invited talks were thus attended by only a few people, mostly other invited speakers. But we learned later that the symposia were also poorly attended. The elaborate plans for the conference thus eventuated in a situation in which very few people were actually listening to one another. That odd outcome was reinforced by the hierarchically organized ranking of the participants. Though they had no audience, the invited speakers were treated as VIPs and segregated into a separate, relatively nice dining area. The other conference organizers sat in the ugly common dining room, and used the dilapidated, malodorous common toilets. The un-Republican spirit of the place was signalled also by a peculiarly Russian feature of the excursion we took by bus to the Kungur ice caves about 100 miles outside of Perm. The bus was preceded by a police escort, with flashing lights and siren, that led us there and back, forcing other vehicles on both sides off the road and onto the shoulder. This amenity for the guests was a symptom of a tradition that takes for granted the abusive use of police power to provide markers of status for politically designated elites.

A young Russian woman asked me what I thought of the Russian people, and I told her, "They are warm and generous, but they have suffered more from their history than almost any modern people. That suffering reflects itself in their rough public manners, and this conference itself reveals the lingering effects from a long history of oppression."

Making the transition into the modern world is obviously not going to be easy for the Russians, but they have energy and intelligence, and the communication barriers between Russia and the outside world have now been thoroughly broken down. The Russian translators were so fluent in English partly because they avidly watch American movies and converse with American visitors. They also have computers, and the Internet gives them unlimited access to information in the world at large.

Perm is a remote region, so remote that it was beyond the reach of German bombers and could therefore be used as a manufacturing center for munitions during World War Two. After the war, its remoteness also made it suitable as a location for a camp in the Gulag. There are museums in Perm for both those phases of the Russian experience. In recent years, geographic remoteness has ceased to be an isolating factor. Even in Perm, ordinary people are now brought constantly into interaction with life outside of Russia. That interaction is a main source of hope that the Russians will eventually find ways to pull themselves out of the quagmire of their own history.

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