

David Satter

**Never Speak to Strangers and Other Writing
from Russia and the Soviet Union**

Volume 2

David Satter

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ibidem
Verlag

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Cover picture: © Marie-Helene Gugenheim. Printed with kind permission.

ISBN-13: 978-3-8382-1804-5

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Printed in the EU

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Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine war did not arise out of a vacuum. It was preceded by a series of crimes by the Putin regime to which the West did not react or reacted incompetently. The West's passivity, which was intended to avoid tensions with Russia, was actually a fatal mistake because it conditioned the Putin regime to believe that it could commit crimes with impunity. This contributed to the belief in Moscow that the regime had nothing to fear from initiating an all-out war.

There is incontrovertible evidence, for example, that Putin and the Yeltsin entourage were responsible for the bombings of four Russian apartment buildings in September 1999 which brought Putin to power. In August 1999, Putin was named Russia's prime minister. His approval rating, mirroring the hatred in Russia of Boris Yeltsin who selected him, was 2 per cent. There seemed little hope that Putin or indeed anyone associated with Yeltsin could succeed him. But the bombings changed everything. They were used as a pretext for starting a new war in Chechnya. Putin was put in charge of the war and cast in the role of the avenger of terrorist attacks against ordinary Russian citizens. His popularity soared. His association with the corrupt Yeltsin regime was forgotten and he was elected president.

In fact, the role of the regime in carrying out the bombings should not be in doubt. A fifth bomb was planted in the basement of a building in Ryazan southeast of Moscow but was discovered before it could explode. The bombers were captured and turned out to be agents of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) This means that the bombs in the four successful attacks were also planted by the FSB. The Ryazan bomb tested positive for hexogen; the same explosive used in the four successful explosions. In other words, the Putin regime is and always has been illegitimate.

The importance of the apartment bombings for Russia's post-communist history cannot be exaggerated. Despite this, however, until recent years, Western journalists and officials were little interested in them and reacted with rejection and discomfort whenever

the subject was broached. In fact, many preferred a world of illusions that the Russians were happy to provide.

One of the instruments for disinforming the West was the Valdai Discussion Club, which for years attracted many of the West's leading journalists and Russia specialists who were given the opportunity to spend a few days at close quarters with Russian leaders, including Putin. Invitations to the forum were coveted by would be Russia experts and, in some quarters, a person began to be considered a Russia expert because he attended this conference.

In reality, the conference imparted nothing of value and was not intended to. Its purpose was to inject into the political discourse, carefully selected clichés that would be useful to the Russian regime in the future. Russian officials spoke of Russia's centuries old concern for its security and gave the impression of paranoia. They described Putin as a nineteenth century nationalist concerned with creating spheres of influence among the great powers. This was also useful in distracting the visitors from the regime's terrorist acts and connections to organized crime.

When a Western journalist or academic arrived in Valdai, he fell into the Kremlin's psychological orbit. There was a general desire not to offend the host, not to ask questions that raised basic issues. In the rare cases when someone was brave enough to pose a serious question, it was seldom possible to pursue the matter with follow up questions. The floor could be given to a Russian or foreign plant who would then derail the discussion by changing the subject or even asking Putin how he accounted for his remarkable popularity.

Westerners dealing with Russia often resembled sleepwalkers who could not be persuaded they were not truly awake. But the cost of ignoring uncomfortable truths was very high. Ultimately, it was the use of terror against Russia's own citizens and foreigners—such as the passengers on the Malaysian MH17 airliner, destroyed by Russian missiles in July, 2014—that confirmed Putin's regime on the path to its most devastating crime, the war in Ukraine.

The first volume of "Never Speak to Strangers" was a collection of my writing from 1976 when I arrived in the Soviet Union until 2019. This second volume begins with interviews and

speeches that I gave about my experiences in the Soviet Union in 1976-82. The experience of the Soviet Union is often forgotten in the West, but it dominated the history of the twentieth century, and it was the incubator of the criminal state that exists in Russia today. The later pieces are interviews and articles dealing with the Yeltsin and Putin regimes and, especially, Russia's war against Ukraine.

Most of my energy is devoted to writing but, for four decades, I have given interviews to the Russian language media, in particular, Radio Liberty. A selection of these interviews makes up a substantial part of this book. The interviews show my reaction to events in Russia as they were taking place. They were given in Russian and appear here in English translations. In some cases, they have been slightly abridged.

Taken together, the articles and interviews in this volume and in its predecessor are a chronicle of my long engagement with Russia. There is an emphasis in this second volume on Western superficiality and the need to take account of the distinctive characteristics of Russia. I believe that the outbreak of war in Ukraine has demonstrated the importance of such an emphasis.

I also hope that the detailed record provided in these two books can be a guide for the future. The war in Ukraine will one day end and the West needs to approach Russia with more wisdom in the future than it has in the past. Russians are also not beyond learning from their mistakes. Perhaps some of the material in these volumes will be of help to them.

Russia's future is, of course, far from clear. Change may come in the wake of defeat in Ukraine, but external events will hardly be enough to divert Russia permanently from the path of aggression and repression. For that, what is necessary is something more fundamental, a recognition of the authority of Western moral values and a rejection once and for all of Russia's "special way." That can occur only on the basis of an honest understanding of Russia's past history and the knowledge of what Russia still has to overcome.

Address to the U.S. State Department Open Forum

October 1, 1982

I have been back in the U.S. for six months, after having lived for almost six years in the Soviet Union. During this period, I have thought a great deal about the differences between Americans and Soviet citizens. The Soviet Union says it created a “new man” and I am forced to acknowledge that this is true. A new type of person has been created in the Soviet Union as a result of sixty-five years of totalitarian rule, and there is justice in using the term “Homo Sovieticus.”

The first characteristic that distinguishes Soviet citizens from Americans is a tendency to live in a world of abstractions and to value these abstractions far more than the impoverished real world which they see around them. This tendency may be present in any country, but I think as a mass phenomenon, I encountered it for the first time when I went to Russia in 1976. I want to read from notes of a conversation I had in Moscow with an elderly lady who was partially paralyzed and who wanted to see me because she had something that she wanted to say to a person from the West. I think that her words reflect rather well the ideological mentality that exists in the Soviet Union and the tendency to value a mythical world over the world of day-to-day reality where, certainly, most Americans live.

I worked for the London *Financial Times* and this caused a certain amount of confusion. Many people assumed I was a British citizen. She began by telling me that “I deeply respect England for the involuntary decency of the English people.” I interrupted her and told her I was an American, and she replied that she respected America too. She then added, “But you cannot understand what we understand in Russia. You can know that five or ten million people died in collectivization. That yet another twenty million people died in the war, and yet another twenty million people were people we killed ourselves. But understand me correctly, you can only look

on in amazement. You can't understand what this means because the West – not England, not America – does not have the spirituality to understand what happened here. You devote yourself so completely to material enrichment that you only guarantee your spiritual impoverishment."

She asked me if she could call me by my first name, and I, of course, said she could. She then gave me a piece of advice. "David, you have to analyze deeply, or you will never understand the spirituality of Russia. People here have suffered, and we have very little, but in our suffering has come understanding, and this is something you Western people will never understand because you haven't lived as we have had to live."

What was striking to me about this person and why I selected her admonition to me to illustrate the point about the Soviet preference for living in a world of ideas is the fact that this woman was a dissident who rejected the Soviet system utterly even as she demonstrated the fundamental quality of the Soviet mentality. The tendency to live in a mythical world of one's own creation is common to people who support the regime and to people who detest it and it is reflected in the daily operations of the Soviet state.

Another characteristic of the average Soviet citizen which distinguishes him radically from most American citizens is his extraordinary patience. Last October I made a trip to the town of Vologda, which is located 350 miles north of Moscow in the middle of a meat and dairy products producing area. Vologda is known throughout the Soviet Union for Vologda butter which is considered the Soviet Union's finest butter. But there was no Vologda butter on sale in Vologda. In fact, there wasn't any kind of butter on sale. The only product that approximated butter that was on sale was a certain type of margarine. And it was interesting to see whether this inspired any anger in people or discontent. And indeed, it did inspire anger but not at the shortages but rather at the fact that two Western journalists had arrived in Vologda to find out about them.

The shortages of butter that had been added to the long-standing shortages of meat, fruits and other products were explained to me as a necessary consequence of America's aggressive policies toward the Soviet Union and the fact that the Soviet Union had to

defend itself in the face of American plans to build the neutron bomb. I was told that America is ready to do anything to arm itself but won't grant the possibility that other countries have a right to defend themselves as well.

In shops in Moscow, where the food situation is better, when products ran out, salesgirls said, "that's all right, we'll stand this, we've endured far worse." and in queues throughout the country — and this is a phenomenon that is so widespread that I think we can talk about something which is typical for the Soviet Union — when someone begins to object that there is no meat in the shops (although that would be asking a lot, insofar as there often is not butter in the shops and milk runs out in the middle of the day), a voice in the crowd, usually that of an older person, will begin to say "Well, at least we've got bread, at least we've got sugar, and thank God there is no war." This is supposed to silence all criticism, and in fact it does.

Another aspect of Homo Sovieticus which distinguishes him from a citizen of the United States is his instinctive respect for authority. In this country, people, even if they have not done everything possible to inform themselves about an issue, may suspect that they are as well qualified if not more qualified to make policy decisions than those who are responsible for making them. But in the Soviet Union there is widespread deference on this issue. Unlike Americans, Soviet citizens take it for granted that they don't have all of the secrets of the state. If a conversation begins on a certain policy issue, for example, the invasion of Afghanistan, it will inevitably be ended by someone saying, "How do you know that? You don't have all the facts. Only the Government has all the facts." This mentality is, of course, encouraged by a situation in which every Soviet citizen is well aware that the information at his disposal is limited. What he doesn't think about, or in most cases what doesn't occur to him, is that he lives in a system which is specifically designed to limit his access to information.

A consequence of this overall social situation is another defining characterization of Homo Sovieticus, which is his tendency to lie. People who believe that a world of their own ideals and imagination is just as real as the real world can be easily induced to ignore

the real world altogether. And this is what happens, with very harmful political consequences. We saw the Soviet tendency to lie at the time of the invasion of Afghanistan. President Carter was struck by this very forcefully when he called President Brezhnev after Soviet troops began moving into Afghanistan and was told that they were going in to prevent an external invasion, when of course, they were the external invasion. But this lie which so shocked President Carter and was a revelation for him would not have surprised any Soviet citizen. On the contrary, he would have been surprised that President Carter expected President Brezhnev to tell him anything else.

Lying is part of the fabric of Soviet life, and it is not just the way in which the Soviets deal with Americans. It is the way they deal with each other. And not just at the highest levels, but at every level. In every situation the recourse of officials is simply to lie, because telling the truth and feeling an obligation to tell the truth is a limit on the total exercise of power.

There was one case in which several leaders of the hippies, who sprung up in Moscow in the early 70s, approached the Moscow City authorities for permission to hold a demonstration. They had gathered almost a thousand people for the demonstration and being young, they had a lot of self-confidence. The leaders went to the Moscow City Council and said that they wanted to register the fact that there was going to be an anti-war demonstration on the following day by Moscow hippies. The people on the City Council said that "in our country demonstrations are only organized by the Komsomol." The leaders of the hippies said, "Well, we have come to inform you of the fact that there is a new movement in this country. It is called the hippies, and you are going to have to take account of it." The city officials listened quietly, and then asked the leaders to describe the demonstration. The hippies began to describe the demonstration, where it would be held, etc. The city officials then agreed to give permission to hold the demonstration but asked for a list of the organizers in case there was property damage. The hippies, pleased with their victory, gave the Soviet authorities the list and went home. That night everyone on the list was arrested. The next morning the police were out in force and beat up

people with clubs and brass knuckles. They had surrounded the entire area where the demonstration was to take place with buses, which were lined up bumper to bumper so that nobody could get near the square.

At one point I made serious efforts to locate a man named Alexei Nikitin, a friend of mine, a coal miner from Donetsk, who as a result of contacting Western correspondents, including me, had been put in a mental hospital and tortured with behavior modification drugs. I made a formal request to the Soviet Health Ministry for information about him. The request was on a stamped piece of office stationery as required and after several delays, I called the Head of Protocol at the Health Ministry and asked him if he had any news. He said, "I have a statement to read to you. I have been asked to inform you officially that citizen Alexei Vasilyevich Nikitin is not in any hospital either in the Donetsk oblast or in the Dnepropetrovsk oblast." A Soviet citizen, who was with me at the time, an ethnic German who had been trying for thirty-three years to correct the mistake he had made by immigrating to the Soviet Union, said to me, after I described the official response, "that is a lie." Three days later, I learned that the Health Ministry's official notification notwithstanding, Nikitin was being held at the Dnepropetrovsk Special Psychiatric Hospital in the Dnepropetrovsk oblast.

The final important characteristic that I think distinguishes Soviet citizens from people in the West is, of course, fear. There is no longer mass terror, only selective repression. But the memory of the mass terror that did take place is sufficient to make the selective repression highly effective.

I wrote a story in 1980 in which I reported that workers at the automobile factories in Togliatti and Gorky had gone out on strike. A Soviet friend of mine talked to me about the strike report several days later. He said, "That is absolutely impossible. Soviet workers are incapable of going on strike. They would never have the nerve to do that." I asked him why he thought that. He said, "If there had been a strike in Gorky, they would have killed all the people, burned down the entire town and created a lake. And when the American Embassy inquired what happened to the city of Gorky they would have said, 'What city of Gorky? There was never a city

of Gorky. There is only Lake Gorky. There was never a city there. It was always a lake.”

When I traveled to Lithuania, I talked to an elderly woman and I noticed that a six year old girl in the apartment was terribly distraught. The girl ran into another room and closed the door.

Later I talked to the woman, and she explained that the child had become hysterical and had told her after I left, “Grannie, you are going to be arrested and I will never see you again.” The grandmother was not arrested but that child will live in fear for the rest of her life. She was born in the middle of the detente era.

I list these characteristics of Homo Sovieticus, and there are others that could be added to them because I think it is important, returning to this country and becoming accustomed again to the life I know here, to stress to Americans that we are dealing with people who are very different from us, who cannot be expected to react as we react, and who must be better understood by us for our own good and for their own.

I want to close these remarks by again reading some notes I made just before I left the Soviet Union. This time, my interlocutor was a man by the name of Leonid Borodin. He has since been arrested. He is a Russian nationalist and he had been arrested once before in the mid-1960s, for participating in a group of young people in Leningrad who, for the first time in Soviet history, had put together a conspiratorial organization which plotted the overthrow of the Soviet Government.

Borodin said that the difference between the Soviet and the American outlook could best be illustrated by imagining a line of people—say twenty or so—walking in perfect formation, tied to each other with ropes or even chains, climbing up the face of a mountain. To an American, those people are prisoners because only compulsion would force people to subject themselves to such terrible discipline. But to a Russian—to a Soviet citizen—those people are mountaineers and ahead of them is Mt. Everest, a glorious mountain peak and a radiant future, and they are accepting a discipline that would be intolerable for anyone else because they will make any sacrifice in order to achieve that radiant goal—which is world communism.

“People in this country feel colossal righteousness in their behavior,” he said. “Did you ever watch [Soviet foreign minister] Andrei Gromyko when he speaks? For example, at the United Nations? His expressions. There is not a trace of self-doubt. People live badly in this country, but we are sure that we are stronger. If it becomes necessary, we’ll eat the leather off our shoes. Americans won’t eat the leather off their shoes. If Reagan asked them to, he wouldn’t be re-elected. But we will.

“Capitalism is the exploitation of man by man. And that is evil, and you have to fight that evil. If America builds 100 tanks, we’ll tighten our belts and build 102. This regime doesn’t want territorial supremacy or economic supremacy. It wants the ideological supremacy of Socialism over the whole world. And this is why when you in the West stand on the sidelines and say, ‘You are slaves, bound together, following like animals, why don’t you free yourselves,’ the only answer is an ironic laugh because we are ascending Everest. Before us is the great goal and nothing will stop us.”

In fact, the Soviet goal is a terrible one. The achievement of their goal would surely be the end of civilization as we know it. My experiences in the Soviet Union have convinced me that the formation of an adequate response by our government and our society to the challenge which the mentality of Homo Sovieticus represents is one of the most important challenges facing the United States for the next few years and, perhaps, for the rest of our lifetimes.

Thank you.