David Satter

Never Speak to Strangers

and Other Writing from Russia and the Soviet Union

VICTIMS OF COMMUNISM
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Content

Abbreviations and Administrative Delineations

FSB — Federal Security Service
FSO — Federal Guard Service
IMF — International Monetary Fund
KGB — Committee for State Security
RUBOP (formerly RUOP) — Regional Directorate for the Struggle with Organized Crime
SVR — Foreign Intelligence Service

Krai — Province or territory
Oblast — Region
Raion — District
Okrug — Administrative subdivision, for example, of Moscow or military district

Introduction

The Marquis de Coustine, writing in the early 19th century, said that it was possible for a foreigner to travel from one end of Russia to the other and see nothing but false facades. In June, 1976, when I arrived in Moscow as the accredited correspondent of the Financial Times of London, I was confronted by a country that resembled nothing so much as a giant theater of the absurd.

I spent six years in the Soviet Union, from 1976–82. During this period, I sensed the uniqueness of the situation and began collecting the personal stories of Soviet citizens with the intent of preserving them for posterity. I was banned from the Soviet Union after 1982, allowed back in 1990, and finally expelled from Russia in 2013 on the grounds that the security organs regarded my presence as "undesirable."

During these years, I observed four different Russias which managed to differ radically from each other while remaining essentially the same. From 1976 to 1982, I witnessed the Soviet Union at the height of its world power and a people in a state of ideological stupefaction. With the advent of Gorbachev's perestroika, the Soviet population was liberated from the unreal world of the ideology and the state hurtled to its inevitable collapse. When independent Russia emerged from the wreckage, the failure to replace the missing ideology with a genuine set of universal moral values led to Russia's complete criminalization.

Finally, the unreal world of the Soviet ideology took its revenge in September, 1999 with the bombing of four Russian apartment buildings that made possible Vladimir Putin's rise to power and the resurrection in Russia of the Soviet Union in a different guise.

The imaginary world of Marxist-Leninist ideology never really went away because the issue was never its validity but rather its political effectiveness. Mentally subjugated individuals can be treated as raw material for the purposes of the state which is why an ideology is so useful. By the time I was expelled from Russia in

2013, the re-propagandizing of Russia had been long accomplished and Russia is in a state of ideological control without an ideology to this day.

As Russia evolved, the conditions of work for a journalist also changed. During the Brezhnev period, all official information was organized to confirm the truth of the imaginary world. Real information was available but it was unofficial and getting it entailed taking a risk. This accounted for the unique role of the Soviet dissidents. They took it upon themselves—and often paid for their efforts with terms in Soviet labor camps—to provide truthful information about historical events and the conditions in the country to diplomats and journalists. The best informed foreign journalists were those with the closest ties to dissidents.

During the perestroika period, the regime itself began to release information that, had it been published months earlier by a dissident would have led to the latter's arrest. Gorbachev wanted to use limited freedom to, as he put it, "unleash the potential of socialism". This was only possible, however, by lifting the dead hand of the ideology which meant free information. For journalists, this situation was nearly incomprehensible. The regime seemed to be organizing its own demise. But journalists were not the only ones who were confused. Gorbachev's effort to reform the Soviet Union by undermining the credibility of its ideology led inevitably to the Soviet Union's collapse.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, journalists faced a country that, while no longer communist, was taken over by criminals and so was not truly free. If the Soviet Union was justified by the myths of communism, Yeltsin's Russia was justified by the myth of democratic, anti-communist reform. Foreign journalists could travel and write freely (although Russian journalists were frequently killed) but they had to struggle to distinguish appearance from reality. The endurance of the belief that the Yeltsin period was the flowering of Russian democracy is a tribute to the fact that very few journalists passed that test.

In September, 1999, Western journalists in Russia faced their greatest challenge as apartment buildings were blown up in the middle of the night and evidence mounted that the perpetrators

were agents of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB). The bombings were used to justify a new invasion of Chechnya which helped Putin to become Russia's new president. Putin restored the institutions of the Soviet Union—false propaganda, militarism and hostility to the West. But as Putin's grip on power tightened and the apartment bombings were followed by assassinations and new provocations, journalists largely restricted themselves to the official version of events, leaving the reality of Putin's Russia concealed by ever more elaborate lies.

The articles in this collection are a chronicle of Russia almost from the day I arrived in the Soviet Union as a young correspondent in 1976 until the present. Depicted here are the things I saw, the people I met and the events I witnessed as reported by me to my readers in the West. In the broad sense, this is a record of one person's attempt to penetrate the false reality of a country which was not like other countries but always sought to depict itself as something it is not.

Emigres from the former Soviet Union often despair of their inability to convey the truth of their experiences to the West. Arthur Koestler, a former communist and the author of *Darkness at Noon*, the classic novel about the Moscow purge trials of the 1930s, told a colleague that it was always the same with the comfortable and insular West. "You hate our Cassandra cries and resent us as allies," he said. "But when all is said, we ex-communists are the only people … who know what it's all about."

In fact, it is not necessary to be an ex-communist to understand what it is all about. But penetrating the veil of Russian mystification requires effort and the ability to understand that seeing is not always believing. The Russians have created an entire false world for our benefit. The articles in this collection reflect my 40 year attempt to see them as they are.