

# Russia on the Cusp

Mark H. Teeter

## I. June

Viewed in millennial perspective, Russian history, tradition holds, makes a rather bumpy continuum: its transitions are marked by convulsions and cataclysms more abrupt, more dramatic, more devastating than the perepeteia of other cultures--a concept (or conviction) which Russians never tire of reiterating, lest the world somehow lose sight of the peculiar nature of the Russian national experience (and the unique burden this experience lays on each succeeding generation of Russians). The present spring, in this view, merely finds Russia once again on the cusp, the tangent of two great arcs--at the end of one and the beginning of another of the massive periodic rearrangements of state and society by which Russians change their national life. August was resistance and rejection; March, April and May have been rediscovery, reinvention, rebirth. All writ large, of course, in the Russian. And off we go.

Indeed, for all the uncertainties plaguing Russia this spring, one basic fact seems inescapable: the Russian future, like it or not, has begun. The ill-defined period of "post-August"--a half-year in which stalemate and stasis competed with scenes from the apocalypse as the reigning public perceptions of the national *zeitgeist*--is over. Russia has begun to move--inexorably, one senses, and ahead, one hopes.

By way of rude parallel, one may recall that the Bolshevik coup of 1917 was dramatic though far from decisive; the real transformation of Russian society, its Sovietization, began a decade later. With the recent compression of time, it seems, ten years is no longer necessary. Though the current Russian drama has continued in fits and starts since the tanks left Moscow in the summer, it is precisely now, in the daily playing out of the drama's spring scene--by a colorful cast of housewife-street vendors, Russian Mafiosi and quixotic entrepreneurs--that marks the real beginning of the revolutionary de-Sovietization whose origins

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trace to both 1985 and 1991.

The winter of collectively held breath has given way to a new and raucous season of rising hopes, rising demands, rising voices and--with just enough evidence to affirm the truth of its existence--a rising economy. There is a long, long way to go; but where to go is no longer the question.

Yet is it really that simple, one finds oneself asking, stepping back a pace to re-examine both one's own recent perceptions and the canons of Russian historiography. Is the beginning of the Russian future so clearly marked this spring, and that future so purposeful, so unidirectional, so potentially encouraging for people here and there? Viewed from ground level, from Moscow and St. Petersburg as the spring unfolded, one sensed as much past as future in the air.

## **II. March**

While one can speak at length on various springtime novelties in Russia's economy, politics and culture, the thing to note at the outset--at the risk of remarking on the obvious--is that the first of these is driving the other two. And everything else. Briefly put, the disappearance of institutionalized, fossilized Bolshevism has led directly and in short order, to the emergence of an economic milieu in which all values and relationships are up for grabs and recalibrated almost daily. This state of affairs may be fairly characterized as chaos or dynamism or both, depending on one's analytical point of view and whether one could afford something for lunch that day--which likely amounts to the same thing as often as not.

And speaking of short orders, an initial impression of the street economies of Moscow and St. Petersburg this spring is that they were designed by a hungry American college student. With the ruble hovering in the range of 80-120 to the dollar, the fast food for sale almost everywhere is a phenomenal bargain: the 40-cent Big Macs, the 35-cent Danish beers, the 20-cent Snickers--and the 45-cent pack of Winstons to round off a well-balanced frat house meal--are available from a simply astonishing number of small-scale individual vendors (who the wholesale suppliers and distributors of these goods are [with the exception of the self-contained McDonald's chain] forms the subject of considerable local speculation).

The streets fairly teem with purveyors of two more traditional Russian specialties (caviar and vodka--the latter appearing in new and

interesting bottles, including the 7 oz. Stolichnaya "lunch box size") as well as staple items (meat, fish, cheese) which had not been available in stores for good parts of January and February (one response to the stimulus of street-vendor merchandising was that in some cases staple goods were apparently on sale simultaneously inside state stores and on the sidewalks immediately outside them--sometimes at similar prices, sometimes not).

Some consumers, predictably, found the adjustment to un-subsidized prices extremely difficult. Going to stores, as one anecdote had it, became much like going to museums in the old days: you ooh and ah at the beautiful things for a while and then go home. The majority of Muscovites and St. Petersburgites, however, evidently prefer a cornucopia of difficult-to-obtain goods and services to December's regime: equal access to next to nothing. Seeing, in a sense, is believing.

One suspects that the case of taxi fares was representative of people's reactions and ability to adjust to the new economic climate. Suddenly re-regulated, fares went up by a factor of ten (or fifteen pending). The public response was, at the outset, to abandon taxis altogether, leaving them to the foreigners and the "Mafia" figures who would pay 100 rubles for a ride across town. Within weeks, however--as more money became available to people, by fair means and foul, and the public perception of what a cab ride *should* cost inevitably expanded--the cabs came into demand again and returned to almost pre-adjustment level business. It takes little prescience to predict that with the next hike in fares the same process will repeat itself.

As in any society, the groups most affected by quantum price leaps--the very old and the very young--are those least able to mount an effective protest against their sudden relative impoverishment. In the Russian instance, this leads to the minor yet particularly distasteful spectacle of conservative (nee Communist) politicians attempting to use the plight of the weak and infirm as political capital against the present government--whose unenviable job it is to bridge the unbridgeable chasms of abject poverty and utter despair created, as everyone knows, by the very Party these concerned critics together constituted.

Which brings to mind another economically-related phenomenon characteristic of Russians this spring--and perhaps, alas, every spring. However loath one is to trot out the traditional shibboleths used to stereotype national groups, Russians on occasion make it extremely difficult *not* to do so. They seem so intent, for example, on repeating certain "traditional" responses to public and private adversity that one

almost suspects them of trying to *prove* that envy and sloth did not reach their nadir during the seventy-four years of general social deterioration which followed the Bolshevik victory of 1917. Today's citizens of Moscow and St. Petersburg are as expert at throwing tantrums of outrage and indignation at the success (real or potential) of a new enterprise or individual as any of their forbears. The national sport of enraged public finger-pointing is enjoying new levels of participation as the free press, new electronic media and vaguely codified (or wholly uncoded) libel laws combine to provide unprecedented access for and dissemination of the views of almost anyone with heartfelt and intemperate opinions--of which there is no lack. As greater numbers of individuals profit from the practice of what is known in the world as commerce--buy cheap, sell dear--the chorus of professed outrage over the excesses born of this erstwhile sin ("speculation") grow progressively more shrill. Though the society as a whole may indeed be accustoming itself to ever more frequent incursions of economic reality (as with the taxi fares), one also hears with depressing frequency various new versions of three traditional questions posed by the Russian on the street when some third person betters his lot in society--relative to that of the speaker: What's going on here?! Whose fault is it?! How should we punish them?!

What's going on in the economics of this new society is not so much the establishment of a market as the emergence of a bazaar. One wants to think that this bazaar, in which everything from baby booties to ball bearing factories is negotiable under certain circumstances, represents some sort of necessary stage in the transition *to* a market economy. There has been, in any case, no dearth of theories and historical analogues cited by analysts of all stripes to explain the current state of affairs, including the end of the Middle Ages, the transition to a money economy, and the decolonization of Moscow's suppliers. Given the well-established Russian tradition of self-analysis through comparison with a putative equal (or role model), it comes as no surprise that periods of American history have also been used to describe the Russian present. Both the Great Depression, with its street corner pencil sellers, and the Robber Baron period of the turn of the century do indeed offer at least primitive parallels. The irony of the latter, of course, is that many of those maneuvering most successfully to become the Morgans, Stanfords, Rockefellers and the like of Russia are, it is popularly supposed, the very people who spent the whole of their lives under the *ancien regime* pursuing (at least publicly) the destruction of

capitalism.

This would seem to make sense, as the legacy of the Party to its longtime cadres included: a large skeletal organization, control of unknown sums of negotiable capital, possession (still in dispute) of considerable real property, and firsthand experience of foreigners and foreign markets--none of which was available to the other proto-capitalists now learning to meet payrolls and fight for market shares. A number of Party practices, moreover, have surely found convenient application in the commercial shell games and suspect business incorporations that Moscow is witnessing: the ability to insist before all the world that *black* is in fact *white*, *up* is in fact *down*--and that in making these assertions you are *not lying*--is a skill neither easily acquired nor quickly abandoned. Take Charles Keating. Please.

It is depressing to see the aged selling their worldly possessions on the street and scant comfort to recall that robber barons tend to build universities and endow foundations before they die. Yet for all the profound discouragement one senses this spring in Moscow and St. Petersburg, there is also a reason for hope. None of the various worst case scenarios for the winter came true--as the Yeltsin people have taken pains to point out. More to the point, one senses in the cities the presence of something that Russia has lacked for most of this century: raw, crude and ugly as its side effects may be, there is a current of economic energy abroad in the land. People are making things, doing things, and selling things again, legally, bustling about, moving products off shelves, enticing customers. The Russian entrepreneur seems to be retooling (and high time) Lincoln Steffens' hoary dictum to suit a new era: "I have seen the future and it's work." To behold all this furious activity now, on one's twenty-second visit to Moscow, is a genuine shock--like discovering a pulse rate in a body declared legally dead in 1917 and buried ten years later.

As the Russian Lazarus lurches forward squinting in the economic sunlight and stubbing unprotected toes on most of the obstacles progress puts before societies forced to modernize suddenly, certain political and social phenomena emerge which help define the contours of the new proto-market culture. The plethora of parties, their inability to coordinate advocacy or opposition positions, the lack of codified platforms and coherent policies across the spectrum--all these represent the political expression of the bazaar that has taken over the marketplace. The specters of the contemporary Yugoslavia and Lebanon haunt the minds of pessimists, while those seated on the sunny side of

the Parliament cite postwar Germany and Japan as role models of a sort. Realistically perhaps, Russia might aspire to emerge as the Italy of Eurasia in a generation or so: politically chaotic and mired in endless internal debate, yet a reliable alliance member with a firm grounding in market capitalism. Framed as a question, however, this relatively happy prospect somehow loses part of its lustre: what one is asking, after all, is whether Russia can succeed in becoming *Just Another Country*.

To a marked extent, in fact, this is already happening--and has been underway throughout the period of perestroika. The popular culture of this society reflects the melting away of the borders which long divided East and West: Russians watch their own versions of "Wheel of Fortune," the "Dating Game" and the like; the bookstalls of a nation in which history and literature shaped each other uniquely over the past 200 years now overflow with the trivia and detritus of Western Everyculture--tabloid softcore porn, American and European detective thrillers, and all manner of manuals to instruct one in the joys of cooking, car repairs and sex. The massive and prolific Soviet film industry has disappeared overnight, replaced not by a massive and prolific Russian one, but by the cassette rental business, which secures *Terminator II* and the like for the VCRs of an apparently insatiable Moscow viewing audience with remarkable (and probably illegal) speed.

It seems silly to ponder the proverbial riddle inside the enigma wrapped in a mystery as one eats the Big Mac, drinks the Pepsi and watches the Terminator. Whatever one thinks of this cultural sea change, there is in any case a real sense of loss among Russians--and Russianists--over the disappearance of certain bonds that were unique to the Russian experience. One of these bonds was the shared camaraderie of resistance: for almost as long as anyone can remember, thinking people in Russia have been joined, more or less formally, in a kind of grand conspiracy against Them--the ubiquitous They who made the evil empire work. Resistance to Them came in acts great and small, from Sakharovs to graffiti scrawlers, and whatever else it did, it ennobled individuals and created community.

Nobility and community seem mere concepts or memories in Moscow today. The great battle, which defined people and would never end, is over and defines no more. There will be no wrenching Nuremberg; worse, there may be a thousand little Nurembergs as a loose canon free press, an undermanaged archival storehouse and a national tradition of denunciation combine to produce a series of discrete and painful morality play-cum-sideshows to accompany the

economic reformation of the country. Everyone will come to regret this.

Yet spring is spring, hope springs eternal, and Russians fairly define the term resilient. They have had to. When large-scale unemployment, a demobilization housing crisis and the end of everyone's food stash arrive at the same time next winter, they will have to again.

### III. June

Viewed from a pace back, the spring in Moscow does leave one feeling that something new has indeed begun--that the future, as George Allen had it, is now. Perhaps one should add a codicil, however: that it is a future still freeing itself, by stages, from a particularly sullen and ugly past--one whose reluctance to let go is matched only by its singular lack of grace on the way out.

But perspective is everything. It has been said of the National Archives in Washington that the only way to bring sanity to the organizational chaos of its billions of information units would be to tip the building on its side so that everything fell on the floor: as you picked it all up, you would have to put it in *some* kind of order. Russia has been tipped on its side, indeed turned upside down--and now, after seventy years on its head, turned upside down once more. As we observe the painful, tedious and time-consuming process of picking up the pieces, we should not forget to appreciate the great and obvious: that this country is right side up again.

Moscow/St. Petersburg/Washington