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An Encounter with Russia

I haven't been to Moscow for 16 years. It's now December 2006, and two months in Russia lie ahead of me: two weeks in St Petersburg, the rest in Moscow. I won't talk here about meeting relatives and friends. We've all, of course, changed, grown older... except for my grandchildren, who are young and beautiful. Of my friends, many are no longer. Not Zoria Meletinskii, the terrific expert on ancient mythology; nor Valentin Berestov, the fine poet and archaeologist; nor Aleksandr Osipov, the dear companion of my school years. Glimpsing the faces of the living, you suddenly recognise yourself in them, the self of today.

My notes are a series of unrelated impressions, and reflections on what I saw. Nothing more. But it may be that from time to time I've managed to see something that those who live permanently in Russia don't notice.

Sixteen years ago, our building was one of a multitude of residential blocks which had sprung up on the south-eastern fringes of Moscow: still decent and clean, pleasant to enter, inhabited by cultured and pleasant people. Entering it now, I was horrified. Foul-smelling stairwells littered with cigarette butts and spit, letterboxes with broken flaps in the entranceway, the lift cabin plastered with pasted-on advertisements and etched with graffiti. The stair landings around the rubbish chute covered with rotting, discarded left-overs; the impression that the contents of the kitchen refuse bucket haven't made it to the rubbish chute, but have been tipped out straight onto the floor. And everywhere, empty bottles. The apartment entrances remind you of a prison or a zoo: steel doors, bars, elaborately complicated locks. Every apartment is a castle, not an imaginary one, as in the well-known English expression, but very real. It seemed as though a hurricane had carried away the building's former, cultured residents, and the new ones lived in fear of being robbed or murdered, and no longer cared about cleanliness. In the evenings and also by day, clusters of young people mill on the landings of the lower floors, drinking and discussing their affairs. Cigarette smoke blends with heavy obscenities. Our neighbours turned out to be young Vietnamese – the *Gastarbeiter* who have inundated Moscow. They were constantly smoking on the

stairs, leaving behind them a landing strewn with cigarette butts and the persistent stench of tobacco which penetrated our apartment through the double doors.

At the same time, the building's communal services are in completely good order. The hot water, electricity and central heating all work. The plumber is on 24-hour call.

Although it's the coldest part of the calendar, winter this year has turned out unseasonably warm: the warmest, they claim, in 130 years of records. In December and the first half of January the weather was damp and muggy. Rain fell frequently, as did wet snow, which melted instantly; and our buildings were surrounded by an intractable, improbable mud. Sixteen years ago this might have been possible to justify – as a new, poorly serviced area, – but now! Nothing has changed – along both sides of the asphalt paths you take from home to the metro or buses is a sea of deep mud. We hadn't seen such mud for many years, since we left Russia. When the temperature drops below zero, the mud turns into clods of ice. Furthermore, the lifesaving asphalt is used not only by pedestrians, but also by cars, which push you out of the way into mud, ankle-deep water, loose snowdrifts or onto ice. The Russian pedestrian is a second-class entity.

But forty minutes on the metro, and you find yourself in a different world. Renewed, regenerated old Moscow made a big impression on me. Old mansions have been restored, and city estates preserved. Entire streets and districts have been restored. Old churches have been renewed and opened up, overflowing during service times, aglow with lights at night, church song audible even on the streets. In newly-developed areas new churches have sprung up, combining traditional and contemporary architectural forms. The three-storey building on Strastnoi Boulevard in which my early childhood was spent is still standing. Our third-storey windows still look out onto the former Naryshkinskaia Square. How many times I passed by this building, past the Church of the Nativity of the Virgin in Putinki, admiring the upward thrust of its tented roof. But it was dead. Now the church is again alive, again a house of prayer, and for the first time in my life I entered.

The Russian Orthodox Church, persecuted until quite recently, has again, as was the case for centuries, turned into a state church, tightly bound to the Russian state and the authorities. You need only drop by the grandiose Church of Christ the Saviour, newly rebuilt and raised from the ruins, with its colossal golden cupola again reigning above Moscow. The splendour of its internal decoration

and abundant guilt interfere with prayerful concentration, with going deeper inside oneself. But this is not the cathedral's intention: or rather, it is not for this alone. Before you stands the exultant state church itself. The cathedral is its symbol, and its close proximity to the Kremlin is no accident.

In Russia, everything is contradictory and double-sided. In the renewal of the old, as in everything, modern, two-faced Russia is reflected. Old Arbat and its adjacent streets and lanes, deeply connected with the history of Russia's intelligentsia, no longer belong to the people who once lived there. They are now given over to the firms, shops and restaurants which cater to rich foreigners and home-grown *nouveaux riches*. The well-restored walls remain, but the life has gone from them, just as Moscow's intellectual life has gone, which flickered even in the Soviet years. The Arbat spirit which Okudzhava¹ celebrated in song has gone. It is now a shout-filled bazaar, an exultant 'victors' feast'.

The same story with Stoleshnikov Lane and Petrovskii Passazh: they are cold and empty, the names of foreign firms on their beautiful old facades, garlands of glowing electric bulbs hanging like a spider's web above the street or emphasising the facades' architecture. But lifeless. Where crowds once thronged, now there is only the occasional passer-by. Here now is Spiridonovka and its surrounding streets: the world of my childhood. People watchful of passers-by wander along old Moscow's renewed streets: in Soviet times they lingered near large government buildings, but now they guard new masters, the representatives of triumphant capital. This is modern-day Moscow. In today's Russia, differentiating between power and capital is no easy task. But Tverskoi and Gogolevskii boulevards are as beautiful under snow as ever. It is on such boulevards on a snowy winter's day or at dusk that the memory of that other, old Moscow is preserved. A memory like virgin, untrodden snow.

I was struck, having come to Russia after so many years, by the abundance of consumer goods. The crowds of shoppers in the stores speak of the fact that people have money and something to spend it on. But the people we know say that this is the situation only in the cities, and in far from all of them.

Russians are, as before, notably fond of their food. This may be a legacy of the lean years, or perhaps a peculiarity of the national character. Here are the names

¹ Bulat Okudzhava (1924–97): singer-poet known for his distinctive *chanson* style. His widespread appeal in the Soviet Union was due in great part to his independence of spirit vis-à-vis 'official' Soviet culture.

of some goods on the counters: *Tvorozhok*, *Kartoshechka*, *Tortik*. An advertisement at one restaurant invites people ‘to try our borshch with pampushechki’.² Moscow’s central streets have a multitude of expensive restaurants, and very few places where one can grab a bite quickly and relatively cheaply. In this regard, Moscow is far behind even St Petersburg. Cafés of another type are popular in Moscow. It is here that people come ‘to sit a while’. Almost all the café tables are taken, even during the day. Young women predominate; sometimes, sitting at separate tables, are young men with round, closely-cropped heads, secretively discussing something. And it’s improbably smoky: the smoke simply sits in the air.

The book shops... there had been nothing like them in Russia for decades. The unaccustomed visitor is stunned by the abundance of books on all aspects of the humanities. Almost everything of significance that has ever been published by Russian and emigré philosophers, historians, writers and social and political figures has been re-issued. The works of all the outstanding thinkers of the past, and influential (or simply fashionable) modern Western authors, have been translated into Russian. The sacred texts of all world civilisations have been published. The catalogue of books on mythology and religious studies published in Russian translation is enormous. Esotericism, Eastern mysticism and theosophy are very popular. Alongside this, the Soviet ideological legacy is being demythologised: I’ll just mention Iurii Druzhnikov’s book on Pavel Morozov.³ This book, published by Russky Put’, states in its blurb that it is ‘addressed to the Russian reader who wants to know the whole truth about the past, concealed by the authorities even now’. Entire libraries of memoirs are being issued. Splendid editions devoted to Russian cultural history and the traditional Russian way of life stand on the store shelves. Alongside apologetic biographies

² *-ok*, *-echka* and *-ik* are all diminutive endings in Russian. The literal meanings of the brand names given here are: ‘little cottage cheese’, ‘little potato’, ‘little cake’. *Pampuski* (rich bread rolls) is already a diminutive form, hence the humour of the form *pampushechki*. It is also the Ukrainian translation of the title *Boule de Suif*, the Guy de Maupassant story which deals in part with a prostitute wronged by social values (Russ. *Pyshka*).

³ Pavel (or ‘Pavlik’) Morozov (1918–32): the ‘pioneer’ (member of the young Communist movement) who denounced his parents to the authorities as ‘enemies of the people’ for their resistance to agricultural collectivisation; and was thereby held up as an example to Communist youth. The official account of the Pavlik Morozov story had him killed by his older relatives in revenge, who themselves were later executed. His story was explored as a Soviet myth by Catriona Kelly in her book *Comrade Pavlik: the Rise and Fall of a Soviet Boy Hero* (London: Granta Books, 2005).

of Russian monarchs are Ivan Zabelin's re-issued classical works *The Everyday Life of Russian Tsars* and *The Everyday Life of Russian Tsarinas*. The wide range of cheap and accessible books from the publisher Azbuka-Klassika is very good. New talented authors have appeared: I'll name only Dmitrii Bykov's book on Pasternak.

The memoirs of many of those destroyed by Stalin have been re-issued. At the same time, books are coming out whose authors attempt to justify Stalin's crimes. The works of modern ideologues, the spokespeople for widely-held public sentiments, are being published and re-published: the primitive Oleg Platonov and his 'enemies of Russia', 'global conspiracy' and 'worldwide Jewish government'; or Sergei Kara-Murza, with his idealisation of the Soviet past, and denial of the crimes of Stalin's regime. There are books which claim that Soviet prison slave labour played a large, positive role in the country's wartime defence readiness.

The denial of Stalin's crimes and those of his regime is tantamount to the claim that there was no Holocaust, that it was thought up by the Jews. Hitler's supporters exterminated millions of Jews; Stalin and his henchmen, millions of their compatriots of all nationalities. That is the only difference. In Russia, authors who deny Stalin's Holocaust enjoy respect and there is great demand for their books. The question arises: are there really that many readers in Russia who 'want to know the whole truth about the past'? There is also demand for works which portray Russia's history as one of Jewish domination. One such well-issued book carries the subtitle *Lectures for Presidents*. The author evidently hopes that the Russian authorities will at last pay attention to this disgrace and adopt decisive measures.

The book market is many-sided, a mirror of modern Russian society. It also reflects another facet of public consciousness: I have in mind pseudo-scientific racist works. Of course, they all have scientific pretensions, otherwise they couldn't win the public's trust. Their authors are nearly always professors or academics of some mythical academy or other. One need only open a book to be convinced that it's everyday racism, not substantially different from the Nazi variety. The same Aryan superiority, only now it also includes Eastern Slavs. But the racism of Hitler and the Nazis is in the past, discredited. Germany has moved beyond it and cast it away; but in Russia it is flourishing.

Intellectual life in Russia is passing through a period of 'overthrowing its idols'. Soviet-era idols have been toppled from their pedestals, both literally and

figuratively. There's a desire to see great people turn out to be just like us, and perhaps even much worse; it's easier to live that way. The authors painstakingly expose the secret vices of the great. One example is Boris Nosik's book *Maclay's Secret*. Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay was one of the idols of the Soviet epoch.⁴ It turns out (or so our author assures us) that he had a secret vice: he was a paedophile. He was driven to New Guinea, the tropical forests of Malacca, the islands of Oceania, not by the passion of a scientific researcher, but by the fear that his secret vice would be exposed in Europe. The facts laid out in the book have long been known, but they don't testify to Maclay's depravity. His image has been distorted beyond recognition *ad absurdum*. There are many such examples in modern-day Russian print.

However, new idols come along in place of the old. Lev Gumilev is one. His works on historical and historiosophical subjects aspire to be the latest word in science, however their originality is exceptionally relative: much of it has already been said by Spengler, Toynbee and Chizhevskii. They operate on a few quasi-scientific concepts: 'passionarity', the chimera, ethnos as a phenomenon of the biosphere. His global constructions are the fruits of his fantasy. But he wins the reader over with his fantastic erudition: his books are written with talent, often brilliance, and have a semblance to science. The mass reader has no need at all for scientific method and rigorous reasoning. Gumilev's popularity derives from elsewhere: his works have triggered something in the depths of the mass consciousness and responded to its innermost needs. Historical materialism no longer satisfies anyone: it sets their teeth, so to speak, on edge. Gumilev has filled a gaping hole and satisfied the need of the thinking and reading public for another, new understanding of the historical process. Solar activity has taken the place of productive forces – how is this worse? It's no disaster that he is not always consistent: it's only specialists who notice.

That's the key to the Gumilev phenomenon. He also spent many years in the prison camps, had to endure a harsh struggle with fate, and emerged victorious from the ordeal. His worshippers form a kind of church, united around his name like a saint and prophet.

⁴ Nikolai Nikolaevich Miklukho-Maklay (Miklouho-Maclay) (1846–88): Russian natural scientist with a keen interest in indigenous cultures and concern for the impact of colonialism. A romantic figure owing to the breadth of his exotic fieldwork, which included travels throughout south-east Asia, Australia and Oceania.

I was friendly with Gumilev in those distant years when he very cautiously began to present his ideas on the pages of books issued in small numbers by the Geographical Society in Leningrad. Even then, in the sessions of the Ethnographical Division, he shone with erudition, paradoxical thought and caustic wit.

What was the Lenin Library – the country's largest – is now called the Russian State Library. The once numerous busts of Lenin have disappeared from its halls, however the inscription 'Lenin Library' remains above the main entrance. In front of the same entrance a monument to Dostoevskii has appeared, whom Lenin greatly disliked. The library has noticeably fewer readers. In the first, 'professorial', hall are now only a handful of people: this was never the case earlier. The readers themselves have also changed: they are predominantly young graduate – and even undergraduate – students or, on the other hand, elderly people. The *spetskhran* has disappeared: the special holdings section, where censored foreign literature went, accessible only to a select few. But then again, in the periodicals hall, as in Soviet times, foreign newspapers are absent: here, tradition has been maintained. Alongside the Russian State Library's rich fund of émigré literature, Moscow now has the Russkoe Zarubezh'e Library Foundation,⁵ in spacious, splendidly appointed premises, with a cosy reading room and a good book shop.

Next door is the Taganka Theatre, so popular with the dissident intelligentsia, where it used to be so difficult to get a ticket, and where almost everything, to a greater or lesser degree, was infused with an oppositionist spirit. Now at the box office it's possible to get a ticket to any show. What's the matter? I think it's that the theatre has lost is former leftist, oppositionist significance, and turned into an ordinary, respectable theatre. It's apparent even from the audience: in contrast to the past, it has few intellectual faces. This has happened because that very same oppositionist spirit has dissipated from the intelligentsia; the intelligentsia has changed, withered, and the theatre has changed with it.

The Moscow Museum of Fine Arts... The favourite canvases of my school years: 'The King's Wife' by Gauguin; 'Avenue de l'Opera, Paris' by Pissarro, with its flurrying snow and carriages running away into the distance. For the first time (wasn't it hidden away in storage in Soviet times?) I saw Frans Masereel's 'Red Square' painted in 1935: ominous black clouds above the Kremlin, the

⁵ Russkoe Zarubezh'e: 'Russian Abroad'.

crenellated wall, the cold, alien mausoleum. The painting exudes a feeling of fear and numbness. The artist, a foreigner who made a brief trip to Moscow, managed to capture the atmosphere of terror the country was living in.

Descending stairs which lead underground in the capital's very centre, you find yourself in the new Moscow Museum of Archaeology. Here, at a depth of several metres, is a seventeenth-century bridge spanning the river which ran here at one time. Walking out onto the square once again, you see a caricature-like statue of Marshal Zhukov⁶ in front of the Historical Museum, and one feels insulted on his behalf. Moscow has been sculpturally unlucky in recent times. Another, no less talented – but improbably active – sculptor has turned Aleksandrovskii Garden and the Moscow River embankment, places dear to Muscovites, into an exhibition of flea-market kitsch.⁷

And yet another new Moscow museum – the Nikolay Roerich Museum, housed in an old noble residence on Malyi Znamenskii Lane. The museum is devoted to Roerich, the artist and thinker, and contains his pictures and collections brought from his travels in Central Asia. The museum reflects the contemporary appeal of Eastern mysticism and unorthodox, esoteric teachings. The exhibition's final room – with its portraits of mysterious 'teachers' and a mystical triptych of Roerich – is essentially a temple devoted to him and his cult, a saint's temple.

The uninitiated person is shocked at first, but soon adapts. We are now descending into the underground archaeological museum. Two men in black uniform with the word *okhrana*⁸ on their jackets meet us at the entrance, attentively and suspiciously inspect us, check our bags and ask us to pass under the type of detector usually found at airports. No alarm ensued – neither hot nor cold weapons found on us – and we can now quietly enjoy the old coins and clay fragments unearthed during excavations.

⁶ Georgii Konstantinovich Zhukov (1896–1974): Red Army marshal famed for his victories against German forces in World War II. Massively decorated, his foreign awards included the Order of the Bath (UK) and the Grand Cross of the Legion d'Honneur (France).

⁷ Talentless sculptor: Zurab Tsereteli (1934–), the Georgian-born sculptor whose visibility has been greatly magnified by the patronage of Moscow's mayor, Iurii Luzhkov. His most famous work is perhaps the enormous statue of Peter the Great on the Moscow River; a tsar much more commonly associated with the capital he founded, St Petersburg.

⁸ *Okhrana*: 'security'.

Crowds of security and militiamen are everywhere in Moscow: in tranquil museums and libraries, in book and grocery stores, these idlers in dark uniform with *okhrana* on their backs even hang about in cafés and snack bars. It seems that only public toilets are free from them, but maybe I'm mistaken. No matter where you go, you're checked as if you're boarding a plane. One might think that Moscow is in a state of war. In my time, one could freely walk through the Institutes of Ethnography, Archaeology and History. To enter my Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology now, or, say, the Russian University of the Humanities, you must obtain an invitation from a university staff member, show your passport and receive a single-entry pass, valid only for that day. A passport is needed even to travel by rail from one city to another. First you have to show it at the ticket counter, then when boarding the train. Everyone and everything here is under constant, vigilant control.

While on passports, I don't mean an international but a domestic passport, unfamiliar to the citizens of Western countries: the very same passport with a 'place of permanent residence' permit which every Soviet citizen used to have. The Russian inhabitant needs this passport at every step. It is a constant reminder that the Soviet past still isn't far off.

When I arrived in Russia with only a Russian foreign passport, I had to get a domestic passport as well. I'd received my foreign passport overseas, and now had to fulfil the absurd requirements of the bureaucrats from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: to record the receipt of the foreign passport in the internal passport and annul the note in the first about the absence of such a stamp in the second. It is beyond any normal person to comprehend all this. But that's not all there is. To fulfil this requirement, it was necessary to go to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs twice: a first time in order to deposit both passports, and a second time to collect them.

Similar requirements accompany the life of the Russian inhabitant at every step. They are invented to provide work for an innumerable army of officials. It is a country where the bureaucracy prevails, and daily its inhabitants feel its grasping power. Like flies, they flounder in the sticky bureaucratic web.

There are apparently even more officials in Russia than there were in Soviet times. Now, having come to the passport office to receive a new internal passport, I saw a large room and a multitude of window counters within. Behind each sat an official, each busy with some matter and each with their own functions. Many

people sat waiting, or crowded around the windows. Standing by a window, we were made to copy out by hand from a sample posted on the wall a receipt with a dozen intricate columns: and this in a country which again wants to become a superpower.

From the passport office, we went to the local bank branch to pay for the new passport. Another crowd, and we had to stand in two queues: first for one counter, then, for some reason, another. What could have seemed simpler than paying the government for a passport... But to think like that, you'd have to be an ignorant person freshly arrived from overseas.

Moscow is a tough city. Everywhere are multitudinous crowds, especially in the metro, in its countless pedestrian tunnels and on peak-hour platforms. You shoulder your way into a carriage: another crowd, silent and indifferently alien. People are tightly pressed together, yet strangers to one another. It's true that I was almost always offered a seat in the carriage, for in any crowd I was always the oldest. Amongst those people I was the oldest of the city's inhabitants, knowing what none of them did.

I won't ever forget the unspeaking, thousand-headed beast moving unerringly to one side of the platform along a narrow corridor, and the pitiful human stump it pressed against the wall: a legless torso with a big, red face. We then met several more of the same, begging in metro passageways and on the trains. One comes to mind: grey-haired, with a proud, sharply drawn profile, without legs, he pushed himself off the ground with wooden planks gripped in his hands, making his way through the carriage. And another encounter. A young man in fatigues and a beret, perhaps a veteran of the Chechen war: he was too young for the Afghan war. Legless, in a wheelchair. He moved independently, his hands guiding the wheels' motion. Entering the carriage at a station, he addressed us: 'Good people, please give what you can...' Another time, I saw yet another pair: no legs, in fatigues and berets. One was older than the other, with a stern dark face. He could perhaps have been a veteran of the Afghan war.

It's possible that these are professional beggars: I don't presume to judge. But if they're really veterans of the wars which Russia waged, and is waging... Can you really imagine in our day, for instance, an Australian veteran begging for money? Any Australian would find the idea outrageous. Not a single Aus-

tralian veteran would be so humiliated as to beg money from passers-by or train passengers. I think the same is true in other Western countries.

The people you meet on the street and in the metro are withdrawn and unfriendly, unable to smile at strangers. A young woman sits right before me in the carriage, a typical Muscovite striving not to fall behind the latest fashion. She is in jeans embroidered with colourful designs and fashionable boots with improbably narrow, pointed toes. Her fingers have long, sharp nails. She has something of the bird of prey about her.

Another familiar sight are dead-drunk men, lying on the dirty floor of metro passageways, or in a puddle in the street in the winter rain. People pass by indifferently.

Mass alcoholism is still calamitous in Russia, joined now by a drug epidemic. I have two of Moscow's freely distributed newspapers: every Muscovite finds them in their letterbox each week. Many pages are devoted to the most diverse range of advertising. The paper *Ekstra Moskva Iug*⁹ of 20 January 2007 is full of ads like this:

'Wide experience treating alcoholism. Modern methods for breaking all drinking problems, including prolonged, severe abstinent states.'

I'll elaborate: 'abstinence syndrome' refers to a heavy hangover.

'Medical centre Alcoductor. On 24-hour stand-by to any Moscow district. Emergency detoxification.'

'Drinking Help medical centre'.

'Family assistance medical centre. Detoxification. Experienced doctors.'

'Escape heavy drinking. 24 hours. 7 days.'

'Association of Professional Drug Specialists. Complete range of services. End heavy drinking. 12-month guarantee.'

And everywhere: telephone numbers, telephone numbers... Here's another newspaper: 'Centre Plus.'

And again:

⁹ *Ekstra Moskva Iug*: 'Extra Moscow South'.

‘Medical firm Narkolog. Alcohol treatment at home and in the clinic.’

‘Medical firm Algonik. Drug and alcohol help. Highly qualified specialists.’

‘Health and Family medical centre. Escape heavy drinking. 24-hour help.’

And so on, without end. A multitude of specialised firms and medical centres. And like a cloying nightmare, the words ‘heavy drinking’ printed in solid type again and again. Demand generates supply, and the demand is limitless.

Advertising is another of society’s mirrors. It says a lot. What other ads do we come across in the Moscow weeklies? A great number are published from edition to edition under the banner of ‘Occult Services’. What services are these? Here’s an example of one ad: ‘Valentina Vladimirovna Romanova. Hereditary highest-category magician. Enchant your husband without harm or damage to his health. You’ll feel same-day results. A potent spell will rid you of your rival in a day. Your husband will hate his mistress! I’ll save you from infidelity forever. I can cast an unbreakable spell to protect you from any witchcraft. 100% guarantee. The most powerful rituals.’

But it seems that even magicians have rivals. The same page has an ad from a rival witch: ‘Don’t cast an enchantment spell!’ she warns. ‘Are you sure it won’t harm you or your husband, that the spell has been properly done and he’ll return to you a healthy man? Tatyana Vasil’evna Timofeeva, founder and director Centre of Family Conflictology. Hereditary highest-category magician, diploma-accredited in practical magic. I’ll help get your husband back and restore your destroyed family. I’ll return your loved one without harming him! Will remove a rival’s enchantment spell. A serious falling-out [! – V.K.] between lovers will spare you from infidelity forever. Can cast an unbreakable protective spell, correct another magician’s work. Resolve all problems quickly, precisely, without wasting words. Guarantee quick, same-day result. Issue written guarantee.’

A ‘falling-out’ can also be arranged by another specialist, the ‘professional hereditary clairvoyant Anastasiia Viktorovna Andreeva... I’ll return your loved one in a day, enchant him without harm or damage to his health, for his whole life! I’ll dispel your husband’s mistress. One visit is all it takes and you won’t hear of her again! A serious falling-out between lovers. I work in especially complex, advanced cases.’

It’s not only centres labouring in this advanced field, but entire academies: ‘Academy of Love Magic and Family Conflictology. Olga Nikolaevna Iegorova,

hereditary clairvoyant, member of the Academy of Occult Sciences, professional magician. I'll enchant your loved one, return your husband to the family. Will stop affairs and estrange his mistress in an instant. Just one session required for 100% results. I'll remove a spell your rival has placed on your husband and protect him from her witchcraft. Through influencing the subconscious I'll remove any thought of infidelity. I'll improve your sex life through correcting your relations and an attractiveness ritual. I'll correct work of unscrupulous magicians and charlatans. In especially complex and well-advanced cases I'll work on your problem together with COVEN (a congress of Russia's most powerful magicians), consisting of 12 masters initiated into the highest order of magic. All work comes with a life-time guarantee! Work approval granted by Moscow city government!'

Thank you, Mr Luzhkov, on behalf of the women deserted by their husbands. Thank you to the Moscow city government for supporting witchcraft – a vital factor in strengthening the family.

One witch, understanding 'the influence on the subconscious' in 'complex' cases to be insufficient, promises the 'return of lost affection using the methods of incantation, white magic and voodoo'.

Unfortunately, family strengthening can go wrong. One woman went to court with her complaint: she paid a witch-clairvoyant \$700 and her husband indeed came back to her. But the witch's professionalism was, evidently, lacking: her husband returned impotent. 'I have no need for a husband like this,' the woman declared. She said she'd been deceived and demanded that the witch refund her money.

'Hereditary clairvoyant' Lidiia Andreevna Orlova looks into the roots of things. She calls her method 'sex-binding'. 'Your loved one will be able to have sex only with you. My personal written guarantee.'

As does Iuliia Borisovna Agapova, 'bearer of the unique gift of an ancient clan of Altaic healers. The "ring of slavery" ritual confers full, unlimited power over your loved one and a strong bond on the sexual plane. An end to humiliation and suffering!'

'Full destruction of any relations between your husband and his mistress, to the point of loathing,' is also guaranteed by Vera Aleksandrovna Nikolaeva. 'He's fully yours – in mind, body and soul! Forever! Now it'll be her to suffer, not you,' Vera Aleksandrovna promises.

Are these quotes not enough? They are only a small part of the ads, but each reads like a poem. What an understanding of female psychology, and what priceless material for the ethnographer and social psychologist!

You don't get the impression you're in the capital of a country that wants to be thought of as a 'great power', or in a centre of science and culture; but instead in some far-flung place, some African or Papuan village lost deep in the forests, with its rival witches. Is it not terrifying to find yourself in the midst of people living in a world of witchcraft, white and black magic, disenchantment and enchantment, incantation and voodoo, where wizards and witches unknown to you, along with twelve of Russia's 'most powerful magicians', violate your will without your knowledge, influence your 'subconscious' and, recalling the 'ring of slavery' ritual, turn you into a weak-willed slave? The people at whom these ads are aimed are, after all, long used to violence against the human being.

I admit that I would find it terrifying. If witchcraft is so well advanced in society and is as effective as these advertisements' authors assure us, why should their activity be confined to familial and marital relations? It would also penetrate other spheres of life. Where people believe in witchcraft's effectiveness, they turn to witches for help with many diverse motives, including the most sinister.

Can such a society be called Christian? Almost all these people – the witches and their clients – are convinced that they believe in God. But in which one?

Though the women can be understood. It's said in the papers that almost half the women in today's Russia are single, that 175 in every 1,000 have never been married, 180 are widowed, 110 are divorced and have not remarried, and that the country has 15% more women than men. It's also said that the average life expectancy for men is 58 years, lower than in Pakistan, that Russia's population shrinks by 750,000 people annually, and will barely exceed 100 million by 2050.

But are Russia's 'most powerful magicians' able to stop this process? Are academies of 'love magic' and 'occult sciences' capable of solving the country's demographic issues?

Let's leave heavy drinking and witchcraft aside, and turn to something more cheerful. These are the advertising pages called 'Free Time' and 'Leisure'. How do they suggest we spend our leisure time? 'Ladies 18–60 years. Cosy apartments all areas.' 'Student beauties.' 'Lads.' 'Diminutive lasses.' 'Gorgeous girls.' 'Exotic girls.' 'Lady.' 'Dusky maidens.' 'Black women.' 'Love goddesses.' 'Well-

groomed lady.’ ‘Asian pussycat.’ ‘Brunette doll.’ ‘Pocket-size sweetie.’ ‘Lads’ again. ‘Students’ again. And so on.

In these advertisements there is little that is original, and you find it in other countries as well. But there’s something very Russian about the initial two groups.

What’s an irresolute Russian man to do with an authoritarian Russian wife, who needs him ‘body, mind and soul’ and is prepared to achieve her goal at any cost, even at the risk of his health? It’s not for nothing that a witch would promise to return him ‘unharmful and without damaging his health’. His two possible escapes are in drink, or in the ‘pocket-size sweetie’ who requires nothing from him other than money.

A person arriving in Russia after a long absence is struck by two things: how much has changed and how little has essentially changed – most of all, in people’s hearts. Has private initiative boomed on an unseen scale? Yes, but people were always drawn to it, including in Soviet times, when it was stifled, taking on the unsavoury forms of the underground ‘third’ economy. The scale of this illegal economy was gigantic and, when the prohibitions were at last removed, this element burst out like a genie from a bottle. Has private initiative now acquired legal forms? In a formal sense yes, it exists legally, but the people we spoke with in Russia assured us that it nearly always has a criminal character.

Yes, much has changed, but what do these changes signify? Here is Manezh Square in the capital’s centre. It’s the square where we demonstrated in our thousands during the *perestroika* years. Now, you wouldn’t believe it was possible. I remember the sea of people which filled the entire, enormous square. I remember the handful of people on the speakers’ rostrum next to the Hotel Moscow, and Iurii Afanas’ev,¹⁰ who finished his short speech with the words, ‘Long live the new February revolution!’: the event was in February or March. The people in the square responded with impassioned cries and threats to those sheltering behind the Kremlin walls nearby.

Now it’s all different. Manezh Square itself isn’t the same. Strictly speaking, it has disappeared and is no more. In its place is an enormous underground complex of boutique stores and restaurants, covered overhead with some cupolas, innumerable stairs, railings, sculptures. The authorities have done everything to

¹⁰ Iurii Nikolaevich Afanas’ev: liberal Russian historian, founder of the Russian State University for the Humanities.

destroy the very place where people might assemble and threaten them, and the very possibility to assemble and threaten. But the goal of the former square's reconstruction isn't limited only to this. The goal is also in part to re-educate the people, to turn them from citizens into consumers, philistines, unleash their consumer instincts and thereby forever do away with their civil sentiments. This is all the easier to achieve while those sentiments are undeveloped and unstable.

The former Manezh Square is a symbol of what occurred in Russia in those years. The same can also be seen close by. Here, next to the Historical Museum, are the restored Resurrection Gates and the Iverskaia Chapel, once destroyed by the Bolsheviks. The goal of those who revived them wasn't only to restore an historical monument, but first and foremost to obstruct mass access onto Red Square. The Historical Museum's main entry has been moved from Red Square, where it always was, to a side entrance. The authorities try all means available to isolate themselves from the people, whom they have always despised and feared. They don't want a new 'February' revolution, as illusory as it may have been.

What happened in Russia in the 1990s? The words, slogans and job titles all changed, but the power structure remained as before; the external attributes of power changed, but its essence was retained. It was simply that new people came along, gave themselves new titles and occupied the same cubicles and chairs. And the people are still the people: they're capable of short-lived outbursts, but incapable of the prolonged, persistent efforts required to hold on to their victories. The more apathetic and passive the people, the more persistent and aggressive the authorities. They take what the people can't keep hold of. This is true of any country's people, but especially in Russia, with its historical traditions of absolutism. The Russian people showed both their inability to preserve their hard-won democratic freedoms, and a simple incomprehension of their necessity, once in 1917 and again in the 1990s. I wouldn't start blaming the Russian authorities: the blame lies with the people themselves. The authorities are just what is to be expected when the people are passive and politically undeveloped and have given up the most important element in a democracy like some unnecessary thing, the real possibility of controlling the authorities.

Certain peculiarities of the modern social consciousness, and its attitude to the country's past and present, can be felt in the Museum of Modern Russian History. It is of course no longer the Museum of the Revolution, as it was earlier called.

The portraits of People's Will¹¹ terrorists, removed from display on Stalin's orders – he who had himself unleashed monstrous terror, fearing for his own life – have now reappeared. With the consolidation of Soviet power, terror was 'elevated to the level of state policy', the exhibit's accompanying text says. But as we approach the 1930s, something strange begins. The repressions of Stalin's regime aren't shown as an organic phenomenon of Soviet history, but merely an unpleasant detail which, alas, spoils the magnificent picture of 'socialist modernisation' and the 'affirmation of new ideals of public life'. It is as if there were two voices in a single individual interrupting each other, one trying to drown out the other but finally being drowned out itself.

I've already remarked upon the abundance of new and re-issued books on Russian history in the bookshops. This would seem to be evidence of a mushrooming public interest in national history. But in reality, one forms the impression that the mass of the public is ignorant of and indifferent to it. Only a narrow section of society has an interest in history: the reading public for pseudo-historical works, like Boris Akunin's novels, is significantly larger. People not only don't know, but don't want to know, their history, even relatively recent. How is one to explain a mass phenomenon like nostalgia for Stalin and the Stalinist empire? There are several possible explanations, one of them being the conscious, intentional unwillingness to know the truth about that time. Only an insane person suffering total memory loss could wish its return. It's not necessary to be in possession of your own memory, like many people of my generation. Memory can rely on a knowledge of history, not falsified, not mythologised, but real. The modern Germans possess such a collective memory, for instance. But Russia has no immunity from relapses into the past.

Doing violence to history – in both books and journalism – has become a universal phenomenon in Russia. Historical ignorance is especially widespread amongst the young. Our friend, a history professor in one of St Petersburg's higher education institutions, shared his impressions of exam interactions with students more than once. At one recent exam he heard that the Great Patriotic War was a war between Russia (students don't use the word 'USSR') and Germany, led at that time by Napoleon, and that the war's main battle was the Battle at

¹¹ People's Will: in Tsarist times, a prominent political movement which aimed to destroy the Russian monarchy and re-establish the country as a constitutional state along socialist lines. Lenin's brother Aleksandr was a member of its terrorist wing.

Kalka.¹² ‘That’s the type of student we have in Russia these days,’ he concludes, ‘and the level to which school education has sunk.’

Modern Russia, like its émigré representatives abroad, has a large category of people stuck in the past. They are like ‘living fossils’. Their consciousness is mythologised. They are dreamers who dream not of the future, but the past: the past of their imagination. Emigré communities, which include the descendants of the first post-Revolutionary wave, live on illusory notions of ‘holy Rus’’, which in reality never existed. They imagine themselves the loyal subjects of both long-deceased Russian monarchs and today’s authorities, towards whose representatives they act with unconcealed servility. Those in modern Russia were psychologically formed in the Soviet period and continue to live in it, preserving all the Soviet myths and stereotypes in their consciousness. In 2007 they will ceremoniously celebrate the 90th anniversary of ‘Great October’, forgetting that the same year is also the 70th anniversary of 1937, the peak of Stalin’s ‘Great Terror’.

In Moscow, in a park near a branch of the Tret’iakov Gallery in Krymskii Val,¹³ monuments to dethroned Soviet ‘leaders’ are on show: they’ve been brought to this place from all over Moscow. Some are standing, others have toppled over. Amongst that bygone era’s monuments is a grandiose Stalin, though, alas, with a chipped-off nose. He’s been included in this symbolic sculptural complex dedicated to his victims, countless human faces behind iron bars. At Stalin’s feet we saw some half-visible carnations left by an admirer. I can’t discount the possibility that the person who left them could be a descendant of a victim of Stalin’s terror machine, but, like very many people, had forgotten or was unwilling to acknowledge it; feeling, like all the rest, a nostalgia for the lost, ‘great’ epoch.

There’s also a monument to the victims of Stalin’s terror in St Petersburg. Two sphinxes, each facing the other, with the faces of those who met their ruin in gaols and prison camps. On the pediments there are verses by Akhmatova and other poets. The monument has been erected on the Neva embankment, symbolically called the Robespierre Embankment, opposite the main Petersburg gaol, Kresty, and not far from the Bolshoi Dom, the headquarters of the political

¹² Battle at Kalka: between the Mongols and early Eastern Slavic principalities in 1223, said to have taken place by the Kalka River in modern-day Donetsk oblast, Ukraine.

¹³ Krymskii Val: ‘Crimean Rampart’, a small locality in central Moscow.

police. According to the legend created by the city's residents, here, in this place, a pipe ran from the Bolshoi Dom's cellars into the Neva, carrying the blood of torture victims and even their corpses. The monument was designed by Mikhail Shemiakin.¹⁴ Both of us – Shemiakin with his ancient Egyptian sphinxes, and I in my essay 'The People and Power' (in *The Eternal Present*¹⁵), where I compare Russia under Stalin's regime with Pharaonic Egypt and other ancient Eastern monarchies, – we both, independently of one another, captured the spirit of that age.

Petersburg residents say that the monument isn't recognised by the authorities as an official monument to the victims of Stalinist repression, although the city mayor granted permission for its erection. It is only human rights campaigners who lay flowers at the monument. This concurrent non-denial and non-recognition of the monument's existence is very typical of modern Russia. Moreover, it's being systematically destroyed by vandals. This isn't surprising.

In Russia, however, there do exist people and organisations who, in spite of everything, strive to preserve memory of the past and publicise its truth, however bitter this truth may be and however it may wound the national conscience. Amongst these organisations – islands of memory in an ocean of oblivion – are the Memorial society and the Andrey Sakharov Museum and Public Centre in Moscow. The first strives to immortalise the victims of totalitarianism, the second has made its main goal the affirmation of civil society and democratic values in Russia: a goal still far from realised.

The Russian press – with very few exceptions, among them *Novaia Gazeta*, where Anna Politkovskaia worked – sees its main mission as instilling in the average citizen the information and views required by the leadership, while keeping inconvenient information out of print. The impression is of a press which systematically publishes material 'from above', with the goal of creating a positive image for the representatives of Russian authority, and a negative representation of their opponents within and outside the country.

¹⁴ Mikhail Mikhailovich Shemiakin (1943–): artist, designer and sculptor known for his surreal, carnivalesque style. He spent his early life in East Germany and was educated in St Petersburg, where he came to collaborate with cultural greats such as the singer Vladimir Vysotskii; later moving to Paris, then to his present home in New York.

¹⁵ Vladimir Kabo, *Vechnoe nastoiashchee [The Eternal Present]*; Alcheringa: Canberra, 2006.

On a visit to acquaintances in Moscow one day, they told me that jamming had commenced of foreign Russian-language radio broadcasts. This was shortly after the murder in London of a former Russian citizen who had been granted asylum in Great Britain. The post-war jamming of foreign radio broadcasts continued throughout the entire Cold War. It may be that the renewal of jamming foreign radio is the start of a new Cold War. I think, however, that radio jamming is a pointless exercise in our time: those interested in objective information can get it on the Internet. Those who have no need for it – probably the overwhelming majority of the Russian population – don't listen to foreign radio. I also got an unexpected sense of the Cold War in Moscow's main post office: a war, it is true, merely with a former Soviet republic disloyal to Moscow. A notice on the wall announced that the parcel service to Georgia had been 'temporarily suspended'.

Russians are a credulous people, naively and simple-heartedly believing everything instilled in them by a well-organised system of influencing the population's minds. They are convinced that their president is a practising Christian, a model family man, that he's surrounded himself with worthy helpers, and that a hostile West is endeavouring to destroy Russia. Many of these people have access to the Internet and Western information. It's obvious that they consciously reject it, that they have no use for it. Conformity was and remains the Russian's primary characteristic: an uncritical acceptance of the existing order and opinion-setters, and a hostility to dissident thought. At elections, they obediently vote for the designated candidates.

Informal interpersonal relationships have always played a large role in Russia, and have always been more important than relationships based on formal law. 'Understandings' stand in place of the law.

As the Duma and presidential elections drew nearer, the country's 'political' life grew livelier. Surprising opposition parties popped up, vying in their loyalty to the authorities and thanking them for having permitted their political activities. These 'opposition members' very much love the leadership, and why wouldn't they: they're obliged to it for their very existence. They are a special type of Russian sycophant, their sycophancy is subtle rather than overt and direct:

'Permit me, Your Excellency, to tell you directly, frankly, in plain Russian... and do forgive me for my directness... I love you, Your Excellency... You are a genius, Your Excellency... Now please don't get angry...'

The world has never seen such an opposition. This is Russian democracy, and the level of its political and legal consciousness. There are also other opposition parties, however. They're few in number and don't enjoy the authorities' patronage, and are dispersed by police batons when they dare to turn out in the streets.

The character of the Russian people was well expressed by Bulat Okudzhava in his song 'Master Grisha', who will one day come to set life right, rectify and sort out everything. The people greatly need such a master, and when he at last appears are very content.

And what of the Russian intelligentsia? Emerging in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it became a social class previously unseen not only in Russia but other countries. It wasn't merely a stratum of the educated, but the people's conscience. In the absence of political life in the country it became the ruling regime's opposition, a role it occupied right until 1917. Through the mouths of its writers, poets, thinkers and publicists it bore the truth about the country's life and its people, and 'sowed the rational, the good, the eternal'. It was bearer of society's spiritual and moral values, and the ideas of democracy and the individual's rights and freedoms. In the years of Soviet power it was destroyed: not educated people, but the historical mission of the Russian intelligentsia and its place amidst the country's life and people. Intellectuals remained, but not the intelligentsia. In the post-Stalin years of 1960–90 it attempted to regenerate itself, but by the end of the '90s had again fallen into decline and turned merely into the social stratum of intellectuals, people of creative industry, and specialists in various spheres it had been in Soviet times. Its former democratic ideals lay discredited in the social consciousness. Its former, traditional mission is no longer called upon. The Russian intelligentsia – in its traditional role – is no more, just as there have long been no nobility and peasantry. But the intelligentsia's loss has been an irreparable one for the country, both spiritual and moral.

I'll never forget New Year's Eve in Moscow. Ceaselessly for several hours: fireworks explosions lighting the black sky over the city, the cracking and whistling of rockets. It all vividly reminded me of nights on the front: there too, flare rockets burst all night, mines exploded, gun shots cracked. In this purchased, gigantic New Year spectacle, devoid of any genuine joy, there was something hysterical, even sinister: it wasn't for nothing that it sparked recollections of the front. Nobody in this drunken crowd probably remembered the fact that, in the

year just passed, quite recently, in this city, in the entranceway to her own home, a woman had been shot dead: one of the world's most courageous.

Her courage bordered on insanity. Locals called her the 'Moscow mad-woman'. In the old Russia, those who dared to tell the authorities the truth were called holy fools and simpletons. They were considered saints, cathedrals were named after them. In the centre of Russia's capital a cathedral named after one such 'Moscow madman' still stands. But times have changed. Today, the people need bread and circuses: and they're given them.

A different, but also apocalyptic, scene is linked with my first night in St Petersburg: the damp twilight, a cuttingly cold wind, Nevskii Prospekt drowning in dirty snow sludge, and aflame in the middle of it, in front of Kazan Cathedral, an automobile. The bright flames' reflected glow shimmers on the buildings and on the faces of the crowd which has gathered around.

There's a cross on top of Kazan Cathedral, which had been absent during the decades it was home to the Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism. Now that atheism has been thrown aside, the museum is now simply the Museum of the History of Religion and is located elsewhere, on Pochtamtkaia. The nature of the exhibits hasn't changed substantially, but the museum now has a new type of visitor. The most popular exhibit nowadays is a large painting commissioned by someone high in the Orthodox hierarchy in 1907. In its centre, in a beam of light descending from the heavens, are Tsar Nicholas II and his wife, and lower, monarchists loyal to the throne, with recognisable portraits – Purishkevich, and others to the right and left, – and revolutionaries and mutineers with red flags, overthrown by some mysterious higher force. At that time monarchists and Black Hundreds¹⁶ activists stood with firmness and assurance, the revolutionaries with a most pitiful appearance, falling and dropping their flags. This instructive painting is especially popular amongst modern-day monarchists, who are constantly photographing it.

As we were leaving the museum, the cloakroom attendant we were conversing with urged us to visit the grave of Saint Kseniia the Blessed in Smolenskoe Cemetery. It's the grave, in her words, of the 'patron saint of St Petersburg'. And this, in what was until very recently the Museum of Atheism! The main post

¹⁶ Black Hundreds: a fiercely tsarist movement in pre-Revolutionary Russia, also known for its anti-Semitism.

office opposite was selling icons with an endorsement guaranteeing their holy status: 'Merchandise produced by the Helio Shuttle Company and blessed by the Orthodox Church'.

The Church on Spilled Blood in St Petersburg's centre, standing on the spot where Tsar Aleksandr II was murdered by People's Will terrorists, was closed in Soviet times and fell into disrepair. Its remarkable mosaics were ruined and it was customary to deride its architecture. Now it's been fully restored in all its mystical grandeur. You have to venture inside in order to feel the significance and lofty artistic virtues of its architecture and decorations.

While possessing similar national cultural treasures, Petersburg also wants to be like a Western city. Advertisements, store signs, restaurants, amusingly mangled foreign words, are everywhere. This clumsy imitation of the West is even more palpable here than in Moscow.

Relations between Moscow and St Petersburg have always had some antagonism, and the same is true of our time. Petersburg residents say: 'We live in the kingdom of Moscow, not Russia.' But Petersburg isn't the only victim of contemporary administrative and economic centralisation: the entire life of an enormous country is today decided in Moscow, many perceptive people comprehending that this ugly centralisation is just as pernicious for today's Russia as it was earlier for the Soviet Union.

Soon after arriving in Moscow, my wife and I went to the offices of the Federal Security Service, the successor to the KGB. We get off at the Lubyanka metro station. The station's name makes you shudder: in Soviet times, the word 'Lubyanka' was the universally understood synonym for an institution from which people, once it had claimed them, never returned. It is an enormous complex of buildings in the centre of Moscow. As in the past windows with iron bars look out ominously from the black granite wall on to passers-by. This seems to be the very same door I also was once led through...

In the FSB reception area I write a statement: I was arrested in 1949, sentenced to 10 years, released in 1954 and rehabilitated, and want to see my case notes. During the investigation my personal archives had been taken away – diaries, letters, stories, photographs – and, if they still existed, I wanted them back. I live in Australia, I wrote on, and ask that my request be met during my

time in Moscow, as I'd hardly be able to come back again... Two or three weeks later I'm invited over the phone to the reading room of the FSB's Central Archive.

Kuznetskii Most.¹⁷ It was here that people would once come to find out the fate of arrested relatives. An ordinary door of an ordinary building, a staircase, one more door – this time of iron. A buzz. The door opens, we pass through. A door on the right with the words 'Veterans' Council'. Veterans of what – the KGB? The reading room is straight ahead. A spacious, bright room with many small tables for one or two visitors. Tranquil landscapes on the walls. An attempt to in some way humanise the place where people encounter their broken lives, or the shadows of loved ones. The shelves of the bookcase in the corner hold the fat volumes issued by numerous local branches of the Memorial society containing hundreds of thousands of names, all victims of the very institution we are now inside. Besides us, there is one other visitor in the room, with a laptop computer and opened files on her desk.

In front of me is placed a rather fat, grey folder with the words: 'Case No. 3023. Accused Vladimir Rafailovich Kabo and Iurii Enkhovich Bregel. Opened 7 October 1949. Closed 6 April 1950.' The sacred words 'keep in perpetuity', of which we read so much, are missing. Iurii Bregel was my school friend; our friendship carried on after the war. One can make notes and even order copies, but not of the interrogation records. However, a few printed envelopes have been glued to the folder, containing some inaccessible documents. We are not to open them and don't know what's inside.

Who were these two political criminals such an important institution – perhaps the most important state body in the country – was concerned with? Who were these evildoers, undermining the foundations of the state system? Before the war, they were school boys dreaming of as-yet unclear political activity in the distant, foggy future: the naïve, empty dreams of teenagers who don't understand the world they inhabit. They dreamed of other things too: I did a lot of writing, for instance, and wanted to devote myself to literary work. After the war, they were history students, strongly drawn to science and preparing themselves for scientific work. Their interest in politics was limited to conversations with friends.

¹⁷ Kuznetskii Most (Kuznetsky Bridge), an up-market locale in central Moscow just to the west of the Kremlin, home to embassies and galleries.

Normal teenagers, normal young people, not fooled by the propaganda. Critical thinkers, yes, but I wouldn't emphasise the word 'thinkers', because this is also the ability to form thoughts independently and autonomously. And so this was their crime. In this country, the authorities have always seen such people as their enemies. We deserved what we got.

But it wasn't enough for the security forces to put away two students: they were very keen to show that they'd managed to unmask an entire student organisation. It's plainly evident from our case how something was fabricated out of nothing, and how the case was constructed and collapsed. Our case investigator, Odlyanitsky, attempted to 'create' an anti-Soviet organisation consisting of several of my friends; it was immediately apparent however that it consisted of only the two of us, myself and Bregel. Our friend Sergei Khmel'nitskii – it later turned out, a secret operative for the security services and an *agent provocateur* – was also, according to the investigation transcript, a member of our group, a person of 'anti-Soviet tendencies', but, completely unaccountably, removed from our case and not brought to account.¹⁸ The inexplicable disappearance of one of the 'anti-Soviet' group's members is striking in its naked cynicism.

And that was the extent of our case. There were no witnesses. The material evidence was several letters Bregel wrote to me during the war. The investigator attempted to read something between the lines. In our correspondence, we discussed, the investigation asserted, 'in a veiled form', 'a plan to create an anti-Soviet organisation'. The prosecutor who reviewed my case in the 1950s writes that, on the basis of the letters, 'it is unclear with what aim they wanted to create the group' and remarks, in passing, that the conspirators were still school children. But this was after Stalin's death, when the monolith he had created started to show its first cracks and began to review political convictions.

Nella, a student in my year, wrote to me during the holidays that she had noticed some 'unexpected analogies' in Polievktov's book *Nicholas I*; with what in particular, she didn't say. The letter was taken from me during the search and incorporated into the case; but fortunately, everything turned out well for her. Also found in my possession was a letter from Alik Osipov, a school friend,

¹⁸ A fuller account of the investigation and imprisonment can be found in Kabo's autobiography *The Road to Australia: Memoirs* (trans. P. R. Ireland and K. M. Windle); Aboriginal Studies Press: Canberra, 1998. Khmel'nitskii's work for the security organs is detailed in Chapter 5, 'A Hero of Our Time', 115–41.

written during the war. He was then living with his mother in Siberia, I with my parents in the Altai. Alek told me to take a short trip, to hear what people were saying. ‘You’ll see a large, beautiful bridge with piles of sawings,’ he wrote. The investigator had seen some sort of hint in this image; but everything also turned out well for Osipov.

When I was called up into the army at the beginning of 1943, I indeed came to hear much that was new and unexpected along the road from Oirot-Tura to Tomsk. I heard stories about the superiority of the German army, with the barely concealed hope that the Germans would conquer the Red Army and the Soviet order would collapse. I bore further guilt as a consequence of my acquaintance with ‘foreign intelligence agents’: Helène Peltier, the daughter of the French naval attaché and student of Moscow State University; and Peter Kelly, a British diplomat. Khmel'nitskii had introduced me to both. Both meetings with Kelly took place in Khmel'nitskii's presence, and were known to the investigation only on the basis of his account. The re-examining prosecutor's conclusion states that one meeting took place ‘in the source's apartment’, without any other witnesses. The ‘source’ is Khmel'nitskii. Fulfilling the organs' mission, he initiated the creation of a literary circle, although this was attributed to me in the investigation. Khmel'nitskii remained at liberty and continued the organs' vital work.

Any collective creative activity – to which young people are so naturally drawn – qualified to the investigator's way of thinking as ‘anti-Soviet’; and the attempt – the mere attempt – to create a literary club is called in the transcript ‘active hostile work’. Khmel'nitskii was the main, if not sole, source necessary to the investigation, and this is confirmed by its materials: it all relies on his information. News came from the university that I had been ‘discussed’ at a Komsomol meeting for a report I had given at a philosophy seminar in defence of genetics and against the academic Lysenko,¹⁹ and that I had been strongly condemned for defending Professor Rubinstein, my scientific supervisor, who had been driven from the university as a ‘cosmopolitan’.

¹⁹ Trofim Denisovich Lysenko (1898–1976): the Ukrainian agronomist and researcher vaulted to a position of tremendous power by the Soviet authorities, initially under Stalin, partly thanks to his wildly optimistic claims about his new crop varieties. Described by Melvyn Bragg as the ‘self-taught geneticist who promised to turn Russian wasteland into a grain-laden garden of Eden. Today, Lysenko is a by-word for scientific fraud... and he damaged, perhaps irreparably, the Soviet Union's capacity to fight and win the Cold War.’ (*In Our Time: Lysenko*, broadcast BBC Radio 4, 5 June 2008).

The investigator also attempted to use my stories as evidentiary material; one of these Khmel'nitskii had manually transcribed before my arrest and passed on to the organs. According to the investigation transcript, in these stories I 'tried to show one person, the hero of all the stories, following the path of freedom from dead dogmas'. The investigator's efforts clearly didn't bring about the desired result; he even tried to present a meeting with Iurii Bregel in 1941 in Perm, where his family had been evacuated, as an intentional meeting of two plotters. In reality, the train which took my family and other evacuees from Moscow to the Altai simply passed through Perm. The 'plotters' were then only 16 years old.

'Towards the end of 1941, we, being 17-year-old youths [the investigator added a year – V.K.], made a promise to each other to devote our lives to the struggle for democratic freedoms in the USSR,' one of our interrogation records states. Isn't it reminiscent of Herzen and Ogarev's oath on the Sparrow Hills?²⁰

Attached to my case notes is an official note concerning the incineration of all papers and documents taken during the search, with the exception of several letters. Burned are all my diaries and my first childhood notebooks. I began keeping a diary in 1934, at the age of nine, and kept one until 1941. Burned are all my literary juvenilia, written with such inspiration and delivered at literary evenings at the literary studio of the House of Pioneers. Out of everything I wrote in those years, only two historically-themed stories were preserved, thanks to Vera Vasil'evna Smirnova, the literary studio teacher, who had submitted them for a competition and then kept them until my return from the prison camp.

And here's the very same piece of paper – 'arrest and search warrant', with the stamp of the Ministry of State Security – which an operative thrust into my face, when I was barely awake in the middle of that October night in 1949.

All of it was a tragedy: for us, who had transgressed, and for our poor parents. It was perhaps much harder for them to endure than for us.

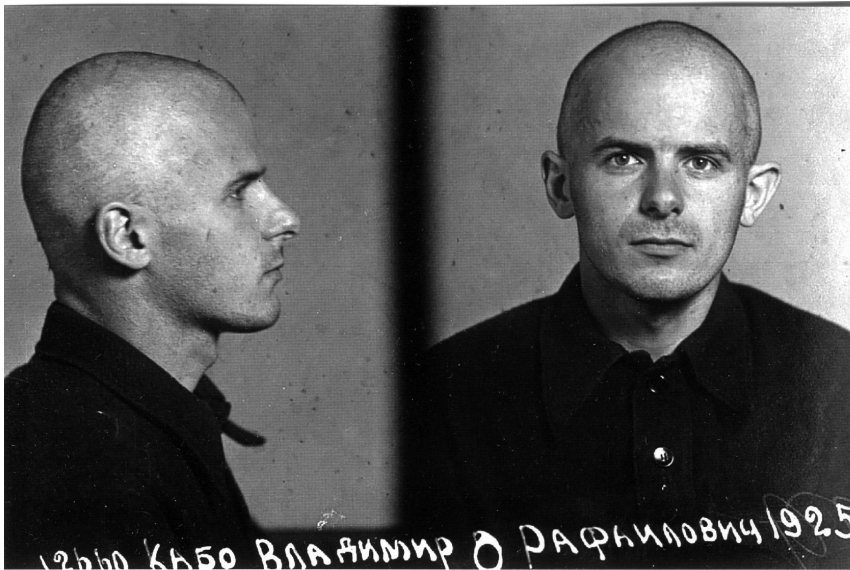
... Here I am in the cemetery, amongst birch trees, before this large, grey stone. Winter. Life again carries me off into the distance, and again they accompanied me on the distant journey; just as then, on that endlessly distant winter's

²⁰ Aleksandr Ivanovich Gertsen (1812–70) and Nikolai Platonovich Ogarev (1813–77): Russian dissident intellectuals who founded the liberal journal *Kolokol* (*The Bell*) while in exile in London. Herzen, a philosopher and writer, was a central figure in the movement to emancipate Russia's serfs (which finally came to pass in 1861). Sparrow Hills: a wooded precinct on the banks of the Moscow River, nowadays the site of Moscow State University.

day in the Altai. I went away to war and we were separated. How many and what ordeals lay in store for us, we were still unaware. We were unaware that I myself would be to blame for much. Together we went, ever further from town, and at last they stopped, the sledge carrying me away into the distance, and for a long time I could still see them standing side by side on the steppe, following me with their eyes.

August 2007
Canberra

Translated and annotated by Matthew Bogunovich



Vladimir Kabo on the day of his arrest, 7 October 1949, Leningrad.