What If Journalism Disappears?

Discussions on Democracy and the Media

Ivan Krastev
Authoritarian Paradox

Daniel Treisman
Russia’s Soul Revisited

Yevgenia Albats
Politkovskaya’s Legacy

Julian Stallabrass
Culture for Sale
Beyond Horror and Mystery

BY DANIEL TREISMAN

Two souls, alas, are dwelling in Russia’s breast. The one is dark, brutal and corrupt, the other mysterious, exotic and inscrutable. Visions like these have shaped the country’s image over decades. Yet in order to better understand Russia today, neither of these views will get us very far. American political scientist Daniel Treisman explains why.

Much of the writing about Russia that is published today in the West—whether journalistic, historical, or in some other genre—fits into one of two well-established traditions. These traditions, which cross-fertilize, have come to define the country’s image. They set up expectations in the reader’s mind that an author ignores at his peril.

The first approach is to focus on the dark side of Russian reality, to show the country as a source of cathartic thrills, a land of disasters. Russia, in this view, is a place where governments have always been brutal and corrupt, where human nature has been twisted into grotesque forms. A kind of historical freak show, its shadows contrast with the brilliance of European civilization.

This vision is not new. Since the first English explorers seeking an Arctic route to China washed up near Arkhangelsk in 1553, one of Russia’s main exports has been unflattering descriptions of itself. Its peasants, early visitors wrote, were drunkards, idolaters, and sodomites; its serfs, subjected to communist dictatorship, were beaten with the knout. “Torture… the descendants of those tor Y erofeyev, are “the children of eternal damnation.”

The dark view is not a monopoly of foreigners. There is also a powerful homegrown tradition of refuting the country’s selfishness. “Oh, Lord, how wretched our Russia is,” Pushkin is supposed to have exclaimed after reading Goethe’s satirical masterwork Die Soule. His contempo- rary, the philosopher Ptyotr Chaa- dayev, saw Russia as a “blank page in the intellectual order” that existed only to “teach the world some great lesson.” Modern variations abound. All Russians, writes the novelist Vik- tor Yerofeyev, are “the children of torture,” the descendants of those beaten with the knout.”

At its gentlest, the dark vision surfaces in the sense that in Russia ambitious projects, however nobly intended, always go wrong. A kind of gravitational force pulls towards failure. “We wanted the best,” said the conservative writer Viktor Chaadaev to his friend Mikhail Bakunin, “but we failed.”

The second common approach to Russia is to turn mystical when the country is mentioned, to exalt it in paradoxes and wallow in the exotic. Russia, it is said, is unique and unknowable. Unlike other parts of the world, it does not share its secrets with social scientists and statisticians.

Most such accounts quote the 19th Century romantic poet Pyotr Tyutchev, author of intense verses about wailing winds, dew before dawn, and stars in the mist. Russia is beyond human comprehension, Tyutchev wrote in his most famous quatrain, unanswerable by the yardsticks of science, an entity in which, like God, “one can only believe.” Tyutchev, a contemporary of Schelling and Hegel, was, he said, a way to understand Rus- sia today, neither of these approaches gets us very far. The dual view of Russian history can draw on considerable evidence. Still, it is an exaggeration. It is easy to forget the context and contrast Russia defects to an idealized conception of oth- er countries.

For instance, one does not often hear of poles squaring out their serf mentality, even though serfdom was not abolished in the Kingdom of Poland until three years after it ended in Russia proper. In both Prussia and Denmark, serfs actually made up a larger proportion of the popula- tion. Those who emphasize Rus- sia’s tradition of autocracy certainly have a point. Yet one should not for- get the variety of town assemblies, councils of nobles, and elective bod- ies that recur throughout the coun- try’s past, from the medieval yeves to the 19th century zemstva. Circum- scribed and insecure as these bodies

One of Russia’s main exports has been unflattering descriptions of itself. were, they do still constitute a bright corner in the canvas of absolutism. To readers of Chaadayev and Cautine, the flowering of literature, music, and painting in 19th Century Russia would have seemed impossi- ble. Cautine, who spoke no Russian, was nevertheless certain that: “The air of this country is unfavorable to the finer arts.” Besides Pushkin, the air proved sufficient to support the writers Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, and Chekhov, the com- posers Tchaikovsky and Mussorgsky, and the painters Levitan and Repin.

Recent history casts doubt on the more extreme versions of cultural de- terminism. Before 1992, many thought Russians too distrustful, collectivist, and hostile toward private initiative to produce a class of entrepreneurs that could flourish in a market econ- omy. They were wrong. Russia’s new businessmen learned overnight how to make money and showed all too much initiative and commitment to the profit motive. The pessimists thought Russians’ values irredeem- ably authoritarian. Yet in poll after poll Russians have shown that—al- though the word “democracy” has acquired negative connotations—large majorities favor freedom of speech, freedom for opposition parties, and free and fair elections.

Of course, the past matters, but the footprints do not control the walker. Countries are always both rebelling and escaping from their his- tories, and those histories are not single narratives but albums of dis- tinct and often mutually contradic- tory stories that offer multiple possi- bilities for development.

As for the mystifiers, they sure- ly have the right to sell their onion domes and spiritual intensity to the West, just as one hundred years ago Dostoevsky, with his Ballets Russes, marketed the “mysteries of Rus- sia” to the World War I Parisian au- diences. Yet, the exoticism and par- adoxes quickly come to seem old. They do not lead anywhere. Nor are they original. The “Russian soul,” it turns out, is second-hand, adapt- ed in the 1820s and 1830s from the “German soul” and “German spir- it” of Schelling and Hegel.

The connection is worth con- sidering. If German history teach- es anything it is that cultures can change, quite dramatically and very fast. One hundred years of pulpit- tions over the German psyche—in its Hegelian, Nietzschean, and Wagne- rien—seemed to many historians to have paved the way to Au- schwitz. Then, suddenly, after 1945, Germans turned out to be quite ca- pable of sustaining a quick, pragmat- ic, bourgeois democracy. If the Ger- many, why not the Russians?

Russia’s politics and society are as susceptible as those elsewhere to careful observation, measurement, and reasoned interpretation. A gen- eration of work by social scientists from both Russia and the West has already shown this. When examined closely, the sometimes chaotic mo- tion of the last two decades turns out to contain clear and quite intelligi- ble patterns that are in many ways similar to those found in other coun- tries. Most of the sinister features that upset critics are, unfortunately, typ- ical of countries at intermediate lev- els of economic development. Russia is unique. But it is unique in the way that a violin or a piece of music are unique—no more, no less.