

Understanding Russia

by Michael Curtis



Vladimir the Great

Russia is an easy country to enter. Procedures at Moscow's airport including passport control allow passengers a speedy departure from the airport, and the hour long journey to the center of the city and hotel passes quickly along the six lane highway.

Similarly, the reception is pleasant at the hotel and the imperfect facilities in the room are of little account. The first surprise is the availability in the hotel of various foreign newspapers or mimeographed versions of them, including those in English such as *The New York Times*, *Le Figaro*, *Wall Street Journal*, as well the local *Moscow Times*, which contains articles mildly critical of President Vladimir Putin, and whose cover features an image of Jimmy Stewart in the film where he plays a journalist.

If Russia is easy to enter physically, it is not equally easy to discern politically.

Russia today, under the rule of Vladimir Putin is becoming increasingly autocratic but it is not a replica of the old Stalinist Soviet Union. In the streets in Moscow there are no traces or physical reminders of Stalin, though some remain in a few provincial towns. However, some images of Lenin are present, and though Russia is not a doctrinaire Communist state the large statue of Karl Marx remains close to Red Square. Yet it is noticeable, and perhaps significant as a decision by Putin, that Lenin's mausoleum in Red Square has still not been reopened to the public.

Russia is still a puzzlement. The country still has difficulties coming to terms with its past. President Putin himself has called for an objective analysis of 1917. In this year, the 100th anniversary of the 1917 February and October Revolutions, there will be no formal governmental celebrations since there is no overall message, positive or negative, that the regime wishes to convey as was the case in the Soviet Union. There is no Leninist call for world revolution. Russia, part Western, part Asian, has no clear national identity, but its government is now an authoritarian system expanding its influence, internally and internationally, as a strong central state, supported not only by oligarchs but increasingly by the Russian Orthodox Church.

An indication of political changes and the complexity of its unhappy past and present is recent commentary on the 100 years of *Izvestia*, whose story is the story of the former Soviet Union and present Russia.

Founded on March 13, 1917 by a small group of revolutionaries two days before the Czar, the last of the Romanovs, abdicated, it became the official publication of the Soviet Union. It was supposed to be the voice of the revolutionary Councils, known as the Soviets, and had some political freedom, as much as was possible in the totalitarian regime, and was more liberal than its competitor *Pravda*, the mouthpiece of the Communist Party.

Its most famous editor was Nikolai Bukharin. He was executed in the show trials in 1937, one of four chief editors of the paper to die.

In the 1980s, *Izvestia* became an advocate of reform, but more recently, though a shadow of its former self and with nine editors in the last 14 years, it has increasingly adopted pro Kremlin positions and expressed support for Putin. In a notorious incident in 2015 the paper published a forged letter claiming the U.S. embassy in Moscow paid gay rights activists to smear Russian officials. Under Putin, the Russian press has been repressed, and a considerable number of media outlets have been closed.

What is puzzling in Russia today are implicit challenges to the status quo as well as public evidence of the horrible past. Some evidence of this is the monument, the "Solovki" stone slab, in honor of the "victims of totalitarianism." The stone was brought from Solovki in the White Sea which in the 1930s was the first camp to which political prisoners were exiled.

In an ultimate irony the Solovki monument is located in Lubyanka Square, in front of the building that housed the former KGB, the main security agency and secret police of the Soviet Union between 1954 and 1991 which was responsible for the elimination of the victims. No one needs reminder that Putin was a mid-level intelligence KGB official for 16 years, rising to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

Indeed, this reminder is doubly ironic since the Kremlin is now planning to give the National Guard of Russia, established in April 2006 and directly subordinate to Putin, additional functions that will create an organization similar to the old KGB. It will have its own investigative arm, and independent ability to conduct police investigations, its own network of agents, and control of electronic devices. Thus, Putin's own position will be greatly enhanced.

Contrary to Western perceptions of the issue, Russians appear to see the annexation of the Crimea Peninsula as a great achievement, second only in significance to the Soviet Union victory in World War II. There are rumors that the 2018 presidential election is being moved to March 18, the date on which the Crimea annexation was ratified, so that it will bring out more voters for Putin. It is also notable that critics of Putin such as Alexei Navalny, the 40 year-old, partly Yale-educated, leader of the Progress Party, critic of corruption and of Putin, are being barred from participating in the election.

A major factor in contemporary Russia is the increasing role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and its virtual alliance with Putin. It is relevant that Putin for a time was in the KGB's Fifth Directorate, responsible for oversight of religious groups.

Already in 1997 the ROC helped pass the law restricting freedom to practice religious faiths considered foreign. The Patriarch of Moscow Kirill in February 2012 pronounced that Putin's rule was a miracle of God. Putin may not be God's chosen ruler or Holy Orthodox Czar, but he has formed an alliance with ROC and benefitted politically from it. During his rule churches destroyed by the Soviet Union are being rebuilt: it is estimated that 23,000 churches are being restored or refurnished. In addition, Putin has allowed the teaching of religion in public schools.

A public ceremony on November 4, 2016 illustrated the political-religious relationship when Vladimir Putin unveiled a large 56-foot statue to Vladimir the Great, the 10th century ruler of Kiev who adopted Orthodox Christianity in 988 and is regarded as the first Christian ruler. Now he is claimed, as is the contemporary Vladimir, as the person who united his country and gained victories for his fatherland. In a sense, the older Vladimir, 11 centuries old, is used as a symbol of

justification for annexation of Crimea.

A new unexpected feature in Moscow, that perhaps may be regarded in part as criticism of the existing system, is a fascinating avant-garde exhibition, "*Russia as you've never seen it*," at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Gorki Park. It presents works mainly done since 2012 by 68 artists and artist groups across the country. It thus offers insight into the diversity of social tendencies in the arts scene of Russia, a country that contains 200 nationalities and more than 100 minority languages.

There is no single theme or overall curatorial statement but various general categories or "vectors" and conceptions are used to describe the artistic milieu in Russia. Some of them touch on social and political issues, the need for social change, expressions of solidarity with victims of repression, support for the rights of minorities and socially vulnerable groups, feminism, fighting domestic violence, and emancipation.

The puzzle remains. In the exhibition, which deals with the immensely complicated matter of national and cultural identity, to some extent a minor spotlight is focused on social and cultural problems. Nevertheless, the outside wall of Gorki Park still bears the Communist hammer and sickle and an image of Lenin.

The Trump administration must be well aware of the poor condition of the Russian economy which has been too dependent on oil prices, suffers from the decline in price, and is handicapped by western sanctions. It must recognize the pressing problems that Russia presents: the Russian desire to increase its exports, especially arms, the impact of Russian hacking and cybersecurity, its aggression in Chechnya, Georgia, and Ukraine, its intervention in Syria and relationship with Iran, its general military buildup, and its deployment of short range nuclear capable missiles. In the

light of these problems it is imperative that the Trump administration understand the complicated notion of Russia's identity and becomes capable of responding to it.