

Moscow Days



The Old New Church by D. Belyukin (1995)

Orthodox Moscow

It was thirty-six years ago that I first saw a huge picture of the Moscow Kremlin in c. 1900, painted in the style of the Russian artist Yuon. It used to hang in the North Oxford living room of the Zernovs and is a fond memory of Old Moscow, though where that picture is now, I have no idea.

In contemporary Moscow little pieces of that Old Moscow still survive, despite the dynamiting of Communism and the 'modernising' ravages of present-day bulldozers. In Moscow south of the river there are still old churches, dating from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, with their smell of beeswax, prayerfulness, profound piety and even saintliness. They smell of Orthodoxy. Many of them never closed, even during the worst years of Soviet atheism.

Then there are the monasteries and their holy relics, St Daniel's, that of the Icon of the Virgin of the Don with the relics of St Tikhon, the Novodevichi and Pokrovsky Convents, where the queue to venerate the relics of St Matrona (+ 1952), beloved Matronushka, is eight hours long. A constant stream of pilgrims arrives with flowers. Opposite the Convent there is a

shop, 'Skirts for the Twelve Great Feasts', part of a chain which sells clothes in which Orthodox girls and women can dress modestly but beautifully (<http://12praz.ru>).

At the Elokhovo Cathedral, where I pray by the tomb of Patriarch Alexis II, there are seven weddings today, one after the other. It is just another day. Here a woman stands on the steps of the underground, handing out fliers and proclaiming, 'Trips to the Holy Places. Trips to the Holy Places'. Am I in the nineteenth century or in the twenty-first? Here comes someone to ask for a blessing. Here there is an advert warning drivers: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. Here is an anti-smoking advert, there an anti-alcohol advert and here an advert saying simply: 'Love for your country begins with love for your family'.

This is Orthodox Moscow, the real thing, the example to the chronically spiritually ill Western world. But sadly, the devout young men, pious young women and the wise grannies, who, easily identifiable, stand out from the crowd, are only tiny fragments of the whole. These are islands of Russian Orthodoxy in the post-Soviet mass. Most faces in the streets, in cars, buses, trams and on the underground tell another story, the story of three generations and extremes of rich and poor, side by side.

Post-Soviet Moscow

First of all, there are the faces of the old generation, for whom the Soviet period was normal. There are few of these faces. Perhaps it is because many are in their dachas (country cottages) where they live off their vegetable gardens. Perhaps it is because many of them do not go out – it is expensive and they are often poor. But perhaps it is because so many of that generation have died. The average life expectancy here is far below Western averages – for men it is under 60. So many die through alcoholism, smoking and sheer negligence (health and safety are novelties), or else because they fell ill and could not afford private health care to Western standards. Street scenes are reminiscent of the West in the 1960s, when 65 was considered to be old and therefore 'old people' were few on the streets, unlike in today's West, where you are not considered old until you are over 80.

True, there are a few elderly women come in from the country and selling flowers or mushrooms to try and make ends meet on their tiny pensions. Occasionally, you see a couple, who look as though they have walked out of a black and white Soviet-era film. These are the people who still often vote Communist. As one of them explained to me: 'In Soviet times we had no freedom, but we did have security. Now we have no security, but we do have freedom'. The point is that 'freedom' and 'democracy', trust in corrupt career politicians who fill their own pockets, are totally irrelevant when you cannot afford a roof over your head and cannot eat and drink properly. Practical security is much more valuable than illusory freedom. What use is freedom if you have nothing to eat?

Next come the faces of the harassed-looking, middle-aged generation, who were twenty or so years old when Communism fell in 1991. They have had to face transformations. The stress is killing them with cigarettes and alcohol. 'Smoking kills' it says on the cigarette packets and yet everywhere there are cigarettes. Everywhere there are adverts for alcohol. 'The beer for real men', says the ad for one brand. Emptied bottles are lined up along the kerbs, where they have been left by their consumers. Pathetic little notices on them lamely read, 'Alcohol can harm your health'. Middle-aged men carry bottles with them. (Old ones do not – they are already dead). Drunks lie at the bus stops, presumably sleeping. The present, hopelessly tiny anti-alcohol campaign will not be successful. Too many people are making far too much money out of alcohol to stop others advertising their poison, Polish-invented vodka and Tartar-invented beer.

Now come the faces of the young – of those who have not emigrated to the West, as many of the elite (who did not pay for their diplomas) have already done. There are the youths who seem only to care about consumer pleasures and some of whom sit in cars in the mornings, drinking, smoking and using foul language. Then there are the girls in their impossibly tight jeans, wobbling on impossibly high heels, as decreed by the latest fashion magazines. Then there are the career girls in their impossibly short skirts. Their career seems to consist of trying to catch a man. Somebody should tell them that their tight jeans, short skirts and high heels may well catch them a man, but he may not make either a good husband or a good father.

There is the gypsy mafia begging (with a gypsy girl who cannot be older than six smoking), the Tadjiks and other newcomer Muslims from the south doing the jobs that Russians do not want to do and taking over the suburbs, just as in Western European capitals in the 1960s. There are the hundreds of rundown, high-rise Soviet-style tower blocks, all crammed together - and they are still building them - paradoxically in the most spacious country in the world. There is the lack of car parks (so you park on the pavements) and lack of organisation and the dimly-lit and dirty underground stations with, at 'Revolution Square', Dushkin's hideous sculptures of Red Army guardsmen leering like demons. This is a shabby nightmare. But then you can find shabby nightmares and worse in every great city of the world. It is just that Moscow happens to be by far the largest city in Europe.

Behind all this there are the abortion statistics, three times higher even than in today's Sovietised Britain, the abandoned children in State orphanages and the poverty in the country. It took three generations to destroy Russia. Presumably it will indeed take three generations to restore it. And of course restoring Russia does not merely mean restoring Russia to what it was in 1914, with all its injustices, corruption and abuses. That would merely create the conditions for another revolution. Restoring Russia means returning to Orthodox Russia. That is far more radical.

The Challenge for the Church

The Russian Church faces huge challenges and bears a huge responsibility in this disoriented post-Soviet society. Having lost an ideology which at least provided self-discipline, much of that society has not yet found a role – other than that which is contained in the bottle. Only the Church can give that role and is ready to do so, once the fleeting and illusory pleasures of Western consumerism have palled - as they will.

It would be easy to criticise the Church for its slow recovery, but it would also be very unfair. The Soviet regime destroyed 92% of Russia's Orthodox parishes and monasteries and killed 600 of its bishops and tens of thousands of its clergy. The Church has had to start again from very little. As the famous Russian historian V.O. Klyuchevsky (1841-1911) prophesied: 'The end of the Russian State will come when our moral foundations have collapsed, the icon lamps over the tomb of St Sergius have gone out and the gates of his Monastery have been closed'. That time all but came.

Much of the young generation seems to be without direction, without pointers to orient it. Without the presence of the Church on the streets, can it find that direction? It is rare to see a priest on the streets or in public transport. True, there are young zealots like Fr Konstantin Parkhomenko in St Petersburg and Fr Daniel Sysoyev in Moscow – though the latter was martyred for his missionary pains. The absence of clergy on the streets may be because the overworked priests are all in churches doing services, baptisms and weddings, confessions and daily liturgies. But more likely it is simply because there are so few priests, so chronically

few churches. Some say that there is only one church for every 40,000 Muscovites. But if the Church loses Moscow, she will lose Russia.

True, on 4 November this year the first of 200 'quick-build' churches is to go up. 200! This is pathetically few. There are whole Soviet-era suburbs of Moscow with populations of over 100,000, where there is not a single church. After the first 200 churches, Moscow will need another 2,000. And after that another 12,000. Only then, with 15,000 churches, will Moscow have real neighbourhood parishes, local churches to which people feel they belong. Only then will Moscow be Orthodox again. The Church may have made a remarkable recovery since Soviet times, but its recovery has gone only 5% of the way that it has to go. There is another 95% to go. When all Muscovites know the Ten Commandments, then we shall speak of Orthodox Moscow, and not post-Soviet Moscow, which is what it mostly is today.

There are many post-Soviet superstitions on the fringes of the Church, all about externals and ritual. Many do not know what a saint is. Hence the phenomena of 'young elders' and false elders. These are the self-appointed gurus who carry no weight with experienced Orthodox, who know the Tradition and can see through the inexperienced, jumped-up youngsters and old frauds. But with their long beards - apparently the longer the beard, the 'holier' the charlatan - these self-proclaimed 'spiritual fathers', only baptised a decade or so ago themselves, demand slavish 'obedience' and so hoodwink the naïve converts. The fact is that most Muscovites are baptised, but most have never taken their baptism any further. It is the plague of nominalism all over again, the plague of the fourth century, when Orthodoxy became the 'official' religion of the Empire and so the masses became 'official' Christians. But 'official' does not mean real.

The Rebaptism of Russia has only just begun. Like Baptism, Rebaptism is not an event, but a process. There is very far to go, and the Russian Church will get no help from the decadent, self-justifying and secularist West. The Church knows this. It is vital that the implications of the Rebaptism become real.

Judge not that Ye be not Judged

Unlike the West, which has umpteen stages of secular humanist civilisation, Russia has only one civilisation - Orthodoxy. Without it, there is, at best, xenophobic nationalism and ignorant, Soviet-inspired superstition, side by side with liberal ecumenism and arrogant, Western-inspired renovationism. Without Orthodoxy, there is, at worst, a mixture of the violence of Asia with the pornography of Europe. These both fail to respect the human person. Only in Orthodox Christianity is there self-respect and so respect for others.

Russian writers like Gogol knew this and called on Russia's nineteenth century ruling class to return to Orthodoxy. His voice, like those of Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) and Ilyin (1882-1954) after him, proclaimed that the salvation of Russia and the moral renewal of her 'dead souls' could only come through Orthodoxy. However, symbolically and tragically, Gogol, the conscience of thinking Russia, was buried alive, just as he had feared.

A word of warning to those harsh foreign critics who demand perfection from Russia, but not from themselves. These are those who cut themselves off from communion with the Russian Church because not everybody in Russia is a practising Russian Orthodox. But Russia stretches from Kamchatka to Belarus, a distance the same as that between Poland and California. Just because one individual among the mass, perhaps even a young and inexperienced bishop, has a foolish opinion, do not write off the Russian Church. There are another 200 bishops who think like the rest of us. Like us, mere human institutions and those

who represent them die, but the Church which is a Divino-human organism never dies. She will live and conquer the gates of hell. Sectarian individuals will not. Understand this and you will save yourself from phariseism.

True, contemporary Russia is still full of Soviet statues and the place-names of mass murderers and the remains of its first mass murderer still lie in their chemical soup in the centre of Moscow. There is still no Orthodox Tsar and there cannot be – not until there is a fully Orthodox people who deserve such a Tsar. However, some of the girls on their high heels and in their mini-skirts may be found twenty minutes later, come in from the street, a headscarf on their heads and another wrapped round their waists for modesty's sake, lighting a candle and bowing before a wonder-working icon in a nearby church. In the queue behind them stands a young man come in off the street, whom you had just thought was irreligious. Those whom you judged in your mind now judge you. The phariseism of judging by externals is an error. It leads to sectarianism. As it is written: 'Let him who is without sin cast the first stone'.

Do not write Russia off in your haughty Western pride of mind. As the poet Tyutchev said: 'Russia cannot be understood with the mind'.

The Russian Orthodox Word

I first visited Moscow in 1972. Russia then was still buried in its tomb after the Soviet Golgotha of crucifixion. Family life had nearly been destroyed by throwaway marriage, abortion and divorce, mentalities were marked only by self-interest, dominating, exploitative attitudes towards others, the envy that thinks that the world owes 'us' everything. In the Soviet Union there was no God and therefore there was no morality.

Those Soviet attitudes, become reflexes, live on in post-Soviet society, but they are retreating. Russia, crucified and buried, is now risen from the dead and stands by the tomb, awaiting to go out and preach to the whole world. Many have not yet heard of and even fewer have understood the consequences of Russia's Resurrection. It will eventually lead to the development of the moral sense of right and wrong and the beauty of moral duty and the conversion of many, both in Russia and across her borders, especially in China. For 'salvation will come from the East', as all the saints and elders have proclaimed, from St John of Kronstadt to Fr Seraphim of Belgorod.

Russia is not Asia, nor is it Europe. But Russia could become a cheap, post-Soviet copy of the worst of Asia and the worst of Europe, a mix of the violence, injustice and corruption of Asia and the materialism, superficiality and decadence of Europe. Some in Russia have already awoken from that post-Soviet nightmare and made their way to the Russian Orthodox Tradition. Most, however, are still asleep. The recent drought and fires were a calling, a sign to sleeping Russia that that is not the way. It is only Russia whose double-headed eagle looks east and west, to Asia and to Europe. And it is only Russia which can be not the worst, but the best of east and the best of west, an exemplary civilisation of profound repentance, a nominally Orthodox country become a practising Orthodox country.

Russia has not yet given her Word to the world – a world which for that matter is not yet ready to hear it. What is the Word that the Russian Church has to give? What example can Russia give the West and the rest, deep in their own crisis? It is not the Word of the post-Soviet world, it is the Word of the Russian Orthodox world, which can conquer the whole world by love, by the Resurrection, by Orthodoxy.

With repentance and the sacraments, with will-power and organisation, with a conscious Orthodox elite to lead the way and set the Russian Orthodox example, Russia can be world-class. As St Seraphim of Sarov prophesied, after rivers of Russian blood had been shed, ‘the Lord will lead Russia to great glory though the path of suffering’. And St John of Kronstadt prophesied: ‘Poor Russian people, when will you prosper? Only when you cling with all your heart to God, to the Church, to love for the Tsar, to your homeland and to moral purity’. As for the poet Alexander Blok (1880-1921), he wrote, ‘O God, O God, may those who are worthier behold Thy kingdom’. It is by no means certain that we are worthier, but there are some in Moscow who are.

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