

A Literary Road Trip Into the Heart of Russia

In the land of Tolstoy, Turgenev and now Putin, what are the stories Russians are telling themselves?

By KARL OVE KNAUSGAARD FEB. 14, 2018

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Russia is a land of stories. Stories of the czar and his people, of Lenin and the revolution, of the Great Patriotic War; of the transformation of a backward land into a mighty, modern industrial state; of Sputnik, of Laika, of Gagarin. Then the story of Stalin's reign of terror, the story of a country that ossified and stagnated and eventually collapsed, the story of Vladimir Putin, the K.G.B. officer who climbed to power amid chaos and re-established order. And how did he do that? With stories of the past, retold in such a way that everything in them led up to and justified the Russia that exists today.

For almost my entire life, these stories have exerted a powerful pull on me. When I was growing up, Russia was not only closed, and therefore mysterious, it was presented as our antithesis: We were free, the Russians were oppressed; we were good, the Russians were evil. When I got older and started to read, the situation became more complicated, because it was from Russia that the best and most intense literature came: Dostoyevsky's "Crime and Punishment," Tolstoy's "War and Peace," Gogol's "Diary of a Madman." What sort of a country was this where the souls were so deep and the spirit so wild? And why was it there that the thought of

the profound inherent injustice of the class society was transformed into action, first by the revolution of 1917 and then by the proletariat's 70-year dictatorship? And why did a beautiful story about the equality of all human beings end in horror, inhuman brutality and misery?

Russia is still an enigmatic country to me. Every day there is news from Russia — we hear about Putin, about his imprisoned dissidents, about his meddling in the elections of his rivals — all of it serving the notion that “Russia” is a singular, comprehensible, clear-cut entity. But what do the people who live inside of that entity think? What is “Russia” to them, what are the stories they tell themselves? A hundred years after the revolution, 25 years after the fall of Communism?

For years, I have wanted to see Russia with my own eyes, to meet some of the people who live inside of that entity, to find out what they think it means to be Russian. That is why, early one morning in October, I found myself driving from Moscow to Ivan Turgenev's estate, accompanied by a photographer and a translator. If I wanted to see what life in Russia was like, unfiltered by news stories, I couldn't think of any better place to start than Turgenev's world, the countryside that formed the setting for his first book, “A Sportsman's Sketches.”

Published in 1852, “A Sportsman's Sketches” is a collection of simple stories about a hunter's encounters as he wanders around the woods. There is nothing here of Dostoyevsky's psychological and emotional savagery and depth, nor of Tolstoy's epic complexity or his ability to encapsulate an entire society with a few strokes; these stories are in all ways modest, aimless even. A man strolls through the forest with a shotgun over his shoulder, he exchanges a few words with someone he happens to meet, possibly shoots a bird or two, possibly spends the night in a barn on the way home — and that's it, that's the whole story. And yet the book numbers among the greatest works of world literature, largely because Turgenev gets so close to the world he is describing, the Russian society of the 1840s. His characters and descriptions do not lead to anything beyond themselves, they are not in themselves part of a greater sequence of events, they stand apart from everything — except the specific time and the place. And it is from there that we experience the world.

The landscape we drove through was flat and monotonous, the sky a pale gray. Sometimes we would pass a rundown gas station, sometimes a small town would come into view, sometimes the forest would open up into fields. Then, among all the trees, a little park suddenly turned up on the right. I saw a black wall and a flame burning.

“What was that?” I said.

“It’s just a war memorial,” the translator said. Her name was Oksana Brown; she was a young Russian news producer who sometimes worked as a fixer.

“Oh, no, this is perfect. I want to see it,” I said.

“There are monuments like this in just about every town in Russia,” she said, not seeming to understand why I wanted to stop here of all places.

The photographer, Lynsey Addario, walked around the little park taking photos on her own while Brown and I stood in front of the black marble wall and watched the flame fluttering in the breeze. To our right, another wall, etched with portraits of soldiers, stood next to a green-painted cannon, its barrel pointing at the gray sky.

“What does the inscription say?” I asked.

“‘Your name is unknown, but your heroic deed is immortal,’ ” Brown said.
“‘Eternal honor to the heroes who lost their lives in the fight for the freedom and independence of our homeland during the Great Patriotic War.’ ”

Only Westerners, she explained, referred to it as the Second World War.

As we pulled out onto the road again, I thought about how affecting the simple flame of the memorial had been. It had rendered the forest ancient, and on the dead soldiers it had conferred a sort of immortality, drawing them into the eternal ranks of the fallen. In reality, death was small and dirty, nothing to aspire to, nothing to celebrate. But with the aid of this memorial, death had been elevated from the real world into the ideal. The flame was the agent of this elevation; it was bound to grimy materiality but reached up into the pure ether; it moved as if alive, but it was dead.

Gradually, the countryside became more rolling and then, suddenly, as we reached the top of a hill, it changed completely: The forest, which for hours had formed a fence on either side of the road, opened up onto broad, beautiful plains, at the ends of which walls of trees in all the shades of autumn marched toward the horizon, and the sky seemed to pull upward, flooding the scene with light.

So Turgenev hadn't exaggerated the beauties of his childhood world, I thought. Because this was definitely his world that we had come to, this was the countryside that he had ridden through as a young man and later described in "A Sportsman's Sketches" — and it was only half an hour later that we turned off the highway and drove along a bumpy country road that brought us first to a village, then to a large enclosed estate with a parking lot and various small office buildings.

There was no one around, and it was very quiet. The clouds hung low in the sky; the air was heavy with moisture and seemed to stop all sound in midflight. In one corner stood a stone chapel, the feet of its walls thick with mildew, and about a hundred yards farther on lay what had to be the main house. I was expecting something grand and monumental, something like an English stately home, because the Turgenevs were a noble family, but this was a low, wooden house, painted violet and covered in intricate carvings.

It aroused no feelings, no breath of history.

I tried to picture Turgenev coming through the door and striding across to where we stood, but it was impossible to associate him with us, then with now.

We followed a young, bearded and bespectacled guide who explained that most of the original buildings had been destroyed: These were exact replicas. Some objects from the writer's home, though, were exhibited in the rooms of the house next door to the main building. There were tables and chairs, pictures and knickknacks, shelves lined with books. But even though these things were authentic, they did not speak; they simply sat there mutely, presenting the past.

The only items that held any real interest were the gun, powder pouch and game bag that Turgenev used on his hunting trips. They made me think of Ernest Hemingway, who was inspired by Turgenev's hunting sketches when writing "The

Nick Adams Stories,” of how he strove to achieve that same effortless intensity, and may even have done so, but never quite matched Turgenev’s receptiveness to the world, because he himself stood in the way of it. And there was a sofa that Tolstoy had sat on; not only were these two great writers contemporaries, they lived only hours away from each other. At first they were great friends, but Tolstoy gradually grew to hate Turgenev and even went so far as to challenge him to a duel. Turgenev observed the peasants but did not become as directly involved in their lives as Tolstoy, who delved deeper and deeper into his search for the essence of the Russian soul, not only practicing the principles of simplicity and poverty but also holding them up as the ideal for all.

We walked into the great park outside, where rows of trees ran straight and long until they met the disorderly forest. There was no one there but us. The damp, chill air hung motionless between the tree trunks.

“Are there always so few people here?” I asked the guide.

He shook his head vigorously.

“No, not at all. It’s usually swarming with schoolchildren, they come here from all over Russia. And next year is the bicentennial of Turgenev’s birth. That’s why we’re renovating the place. We’ll have lots of visitors then. But today’s Monday, and it’s October. ...”

He stopped beside a tall tree with a low fence around it.

“This oak tree was planted by Turgenev himself,” he said.

To the right of the tree stood what looked like gravestones.

“What are those?” I asked, pointing to them.

“Those are the graves of soldiers,” the guide told me.

“Here?”

“Yes. They were fighting the Germans during the war, and they fell here.”

When we drove away shortly afterward, it was the image of those graves that stayed with me, maybe because the violence they represented had seemed so unexpected there, in the isolated world of the museum. That and the two horses we saw lying in the grass, a mare and her foal, black and glossily beautiful in the moist air.

Before the revolution, Russia was largely an agrarian society; at the turn of the 20th century, four out of five Russians were peasants. They were poor, uneducated, superstitious and illiterate. In many places, the way of life had hardly changed since the Middle Ages. Leon Trotsky begins his “History of the Russian Revolution” with the observation that “the fundamental and most stable feature of Russian history is the slow tempo of her development, with the economic backwardness, primitiveness of social forms and low level of culture resulting from it.” In “A People’s Tragedy,” the British historian Orlando Figes describes a primitive world in which every aspect of life was governed by a relentless conformity: Everyone wore the same clothes, everyone’s hair was cut in the same way, everyone ate from the same bowl, everyone slept in the same room. “Modesty had very little place in the peasant world,” Figes writes. “Toilets were in the open air” and “urban doctors were shocked by the peasant custom of spitting into a person’s eye to get rid of sties, of feeding children mouth to mouth and of calming baby boys by sucking on their penis.”

These depictions of the Russian peasantry in the 19th century as backward and primitive are not untrue, but they are viewed from a very great distance and are extremely generalized. Distance, of course, is necessary; it is the historian’s aid to understanding and explaining social development, just as it is the politician’s aid to dealing with social problems. But a similar distance is what allowed the Bolsheviks to destroy the structure of their society without a thought for the hundreds of thousands and, eventually, millions who died in the process, because these were not real people, only “peasants,” viewed from so high above that all individuality was erased. And if the overall statistics improved — well, then it had all been worth it.

“A Sportsman’s Sketches” shows the culture Trotsky and Figes describe, but from the inside, with no distance. One of the best stories in the book is about a man returning from the hunt who loses his way and then, in the darkness, spies two fires

burning in a field far below him. It turns out that a group of boys are camped out, minding the horses. They lie around the fires, telling stories to pass the time, most of them tales of supernatural occurrences. Turgenev brings these boys to life, each with his own distinct appearance and personality, and there is something deeply moving about the way he portrays them; he takes them so seriously, according them dignity, and the stories they tell one another, there in the night, are in themselves incandescent. This is not the superstitious, reactionary peasant class of the revolutionaries and the historians; these are five boys, each with a life of his own, woven from the threads of their language, their culture and the camaraderie of their campfire.

“A Sportsman’s Sketches” was by no means a political statement, yet it had great political impact in Russia in the 1850s, possibly precisely because, lacking a political or literary agenda, it showed life for what it was and not for what it symbolized.

At that time, serfdom still prevailed in Russia, which is to say that the nobility not only owned the villages on their land, they also owned the peasants who lived in them. It was, in other words, a form of slavery. Turgenev’s book did much to stoke the fast-growing criticism of serfdom, which was abolished nine years later, in 1861, by the progressive Czar Alexander II. He was assassinated 20 years later, his death witnessed by his son and grandson, who would become the next two czars, Alexander III and Nicholas II. It is not unreasonable to imagine that his assassination was instrumental in turning both of them into reactionary, anti-liberal autocrats, so opposed to any sort of reform and so intent on gagging all opposition that eventually revolution became inevitable.

It was dark when we found the exact spot where Turgenev’s story about the boys took place. It was called Bezhin Meadow, and it was an old woman who pointed it out to us. She was dressed in a skirt and head scarf, and she was working all alone in the middle of the field, gleaning corn from the stubble, a wheelbarrow by her side.

“Would you like to speak to her?” Addario asked from the back seat.

“No, I don’t think so,” I said.

“Well, I’d like to take some shots of her anyway,” she said.

Brown and Addario got out and stepped over to the fence. Brown said something in Russian; the woman replied. Suddenly I realized that I had to speak to her, that the museum, the trees and the old books, the things I had been focusing on so far, represented nothing but my own ideas about the country I was visiting.

What on earth was I getting myself into?

My whole view of Russia was based on myths and romantic imagery. What kind of hubris made me believe that I would be capable of saying something about the real Russia after a nine-day trip through one tiny corner of this vast country?

It was like describing a bucket of water in order to say something about the ocean.

I went out and joined them by the fence.

“She says she doesn’t want her picture taken,” Brown said.

“Why not?”

“She says she’s just gathering some corn for her chickens,” she told me. “But this isn’t her field.”

“I see,” I said.

It was no great crime, though — the corn had already been harvested — and after a bit of back and forth, the woman agreed to tell us about her life.

“Ask her where she lives,” Addario said, snapping away. “Ask her what she does. Ask her if she has any family.”

It appeared that the woman had been born in a small village just down the road. She had moved to Moscow when she was 15 and lived there until just a few years ago when she returned to the village to take care of her mother after her father died.

“When I was a girl, there were lots of people here,” she said. “It was a thriving, bustling community, there must have been 15 or 20 families living there,” she said,

pointing to the unpainted cottages farther down the road. “Now they’ve all moved away.”

“Have you read Turgenev?” I said.

“I’ve read ‘A Sportsman’s Sketches.’ It’s set in this area.”

“Did you like it?”

She smiled for the first time.

“I read it to my grandchildren now.”

“Is it different here now from the way it was when Turgenev wrote about it?”

“The area is the same. But life here is different. It’s very different.”

She then pointed us in the direction of the meadow, and we walked on. The trees lining the hill beyond it seemed to soak up the darkness. They stood there in inky silhouette against the still palely gleaming sky. There was utter silence, our footsteps the only sound.

Then the cry of a bird in the distance.

The boys in Turgenev’s story could have been here now, I thought. And their grandchildren could have risen up against the czar, and their grandchildren could have been crushed by revolution. I stood watching and listening, waiting for some sense of connection. Everything around me was just as it would have been in the 1840s. The trees, the meadow, the valley, the hills, the twilight, all of it. And yet everything was different.

The past was in us, I thought, not in the world.

The train to Kazan stretched for what seemed like miles alongside the platform at the Moscow station. The green-painted locomotive and the long string of gray carriages looked like something from wartime. We had a second-class compartment with four berths, and as the train slowly pulled out of the station, I took out my book on Lenin, tucked my suitcase under the bed and settled myself by the window.

The book, “Lenin the Dictator: An Intimate Portrait,” by Victor Sebestyen, was intriguing. Lenin’s favorite writer was always Turgenev. I found that strange, because Lenin was one of the most strong-willed men who ever lived; he was at once zealously one-sided and emotionally evasive, but nevertheless, throughout his exile, no matter where he happened to be, in Zurich, London or Paris, he made sure to have Turgenev’s collected works with him.

I was reading about Lenin because the places we were going to for the next seven days had been set up in part with him in mind: In just a few weeks it would be exactly 100 years since the 1917 October Revolution, when he almost single-handedly seized power in Russia. We were going to Kazan, where Lenin studied law and where he was radicalized, and then we were going to Yekaterinburg, where Czar Nicholas II and his family were executed in a cellar on Lenin’s order in 1918. That act, in its ruthless brutality, marked the end of Russia’s old world and the beginning of its new one. Everything in the old world would be eradicated to make way for the new; no price was too high and there would be no way back.

I desperately wanted a cigarette. Brown said it was against the law to smoke on the train, but if we just bought something from the crew, a candy bar or some tea, she was sure they would be able to suggest something.

After we finished our tea, I followed Brown through the carriage. Just then the conductor emerged from her little cubicle. Her face was set and solemn, grim almost. She opened the door leading to the narrow passageway between the carriages.

“Smoke here,” she said.

I stepped out onto the juddering, swaying metal platform, one side of which was open all the way down to the rails underneath, so the sound of the thundering wheels filled the tiny space. She shut the door, and I bent to light a cigarette.

When I got back, we walked through to the adjoining carriage. This one was third class: completely open, with bunk beds on both sides, and it was packed with people. The feet and heads of those sleeping in the top bunks were only inches away from my face as I went by, and the fact that they lay completely uncovered made me

feel that I was intruding on something private. But none of the passengers seemed to think anything of it; they acted as if they were at home in their own living rooms.

Not since the 19th century could any Scandinavian railway carriage have been as crowded, I thought.

We stopped in front of three women sitting chatting by a window who could have been in their late 50s. I asked Brown if she could introduce us. She did, and the three women eyed me attentively and expectantly.

“Where are you going?” I asked them.

“To Izhevsk,” one woman said. “Where they make the Kalashnikovs.”

“And you’ve been in Moscow?”

They nodded.

“What were you doing there?”

They exchanged glances.

“It’s a secret,” she said, smiling. The other two laughed.

Behind me someone said something, and when I turned I saw an old man, probably in his late 70s, grab Addario’s hand and kiss it.

Everyone around us laughed, including Addario.

The woman said something to Brown who smiled.

“What did she say?”

“She said you’re very handsome.”

“Oh, no,” I said.

“Are you going to write that down?”

“Of course not,” I said. “But would you ask them if we can come back later and speak to them again?”

By the time we returned it was pitch-dark outside. The three women were sitting around a small table with a bowl of nuts between them. The mood was quieter now, more of the passengers were asleep, the voices of those still talking were lower.

The woman who did most of the talking earlier must have given some thought to what she should say, because she started telling us about herself before I had even asked a question. Her name was Natalya. Her two friends were Olga and Zinaida. She told us that she was brought up in an orphanage, that she could not remember her parents, but that she had a sister from whom she had been separated and whom she never saw again. She had been searching for her sister all her life but still didn’t know where she was.

“In those days, it was standard practice to split up siblings when they were taken into care,” she said. “They don’t do that anymore, but that was the system back then. She was sent to another home. When I grew up, I went back and got a job in the same home, I thought I might be able to steal her file and find out where she was. But I didn’t find anything. So now I’ve written to the producers of a state television program, which helps to reunite people with lost family members, and I’m waiting to hear from them. I’m hopeful!”

“When did you write to them?”

“Two years ago.”

It must have occurred to her as she said this that it didn’t actually sound very hopeful, because she looked at me and added: “It can be difficult to trace people, even for their reporters. Sometimes it can take as many as five years.”

The steady, rhythmic rumble of the train wheels over the railroad ties reverberated through the carriage. Now and again the walls were buffeted by a shift in the air pressure outside, and each time the door next to us was opened, all the sounds of the train would suddenly rise to an infernal cacophony of rattling and banging and hissing as the air from the gap between the carriages swept in.

Natalya started to talk about her Christian faith. She had visited Israel the previous year to see the spot where Jesus was crucified.

“I once prayed for another woman to have a baby,” she said. “And she did. For myself I prayed for a husband. And then I met this wonderful man!”

The others laughed.

As the stream of Russian flowed easily, almost dreamily back and forth in the sleep-drenched compartment, I caught the word “Putin.”

“Did she say something about Putin?” I asked Brown.

“Yes, yes. She says her mother is a great fan of Putin. They’re all fans of Putin.”

“We love our homeland,” Natalya said. “And for the first time we have a Christian president, an Orthodox president.”

She flipped over a magazine that was on the table to show us the cover. All the photos on it were of Putin. In one of them, he was stripped to the waist.

“Do you see that? Could Trump show off his body like that? He’s old. His body is just a lump of lard!”

All three laughed loudly.

“It’s now a hundred years since the revolution. What does that mean to you?”

“We don’t care about it,” Natalya said. “It’s been a hundred godless years. They tore down all the churches. They’re being rebuilt now, and we can go there without being afraid. Here in this city, there’s an icon of the Virgin Mary. It’s very, very old. When it was found, it was completely black. Now it’s gradually getting lighter. With every year that passes, it becomes clearer and clearer.”

When the interview was over, I headed down the corridor to the tiny space between the carriages for a smoke. As I opened the door I felt a hand on my shoulder. I looked around. It was the young, grim-faced conductor.

“No, no,” she said wagging her finger at me. “No smoking anymore.”

What the hell?

I returned to our compartment and sat down by the window. In the bunks across from me, Addario and Brown had turned in for the night. About an hour later, the train stopped, and I peeped out of the window. It was pitch-black out there, no station to be seen. I got up and went to investigate. I opened the door onto the space between the carriages, and there was the conductor, puffing on a cigarette.

“Aha!” I felt like saying. “Gotcha!”

Instead, I locked eyes with her for a second, just long enough to let her know that I knew, then I closed the door and went back to my compartment.

There is a particular pleasure in coming to a city at night, in the dark, with no idea of how it looks until you wake the next morning and step out onto the streets, into which — deprived of the gradual acclimatization of arrival — you feel suddenly thrust.

What sort of city was Kazan?

The neighborhood in which I found myself was modern and well maintained. The magnificent mosque, which I had seen from my hotel window when I woke, was brand new. When I went out for a walk, even the old wooden kiosk I stood and stared at, which was octagonal with a green metal dome and a little spire on the top, looked freshly renovated, more like a reconstruction of the past than a symbol of it.

Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan, is also the city where Lenin studied law and was expelled from the university. His father was an official in the czarist Civil Service, and the young Lenin’s life revolved around school, literature and chess, which he played at a high level. Then two things happened that changed everything. First, his father, only 54, died suddenly from a stroke. And second, his brother Alexander, whom he idolized, was executed for conspiring to kill the czar.

Alexander was studying natural sciences at Petersburg University when he became involved with a revolutionary student cell. To help finance the plot, he sold a gold medal he had been awarded for his academic work. Lenin had known nothing about his brother’s revolutionary activities, and until then he had been totally

uninterested in politics. His brother's execution changed all that. Not only did he immediately join a revolutionary cell at the university in Kazan but, as Sebestyen describes it in his Lenin biography, his whole personality was transformed. The happiness and high spirits of his early teens vanished, leaving behind a determined, withdrawn, highly disciplined, single-minded young man. It seems as though, from the moment he was expelled, Lenin never looked back: He spent the rest of his life working for the revolution, a revolution that he could not be sure would ever actually happen.

And when it did finally come, he forced it to follow his line. The Bolsheviks were atheists, and religion was expunged from the whole of the new Russian state. For three generations, religion was repressed, until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, when it returned with a vengeance. That was very visible in Kazan. There are nearly 200 national and ethnic minorities in Russia. The largest of these are the Tatars, who make up roughly 4 percent of the population. Most of them practice Islam, and Kazan had, therefore, one of the largest Muslim communities of any city in Russia.

That evening I parked our rental car by the curb across the road from the National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan. It was 6 o'clock, and we were there to pick up a young woman named Dina Khabibullina, a Tatar and a practicing Muslim. We had met her earlier that day and talked about what it was like to belong to a religious and cultural minority in Russia, and she invited us to her apartment for dinner.

Dina was 29, we learned, and a postdoc at the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Tatarstan. She also worked at the museum and organized tours to local Tatar attractions. She was six months pregnant.

She was brought up as a non-Muslim, in a home in which the Tatar culture was scarcely detectable and where they mainly spoke Russian. When she was 19, she had a sudden awakening. She converted to Islam and taught herself Tatar. So did many of her friends.

Had religion always been there, buried deep in the society, merely biding its time? Did it fulfill such a powerful need in people that it was simply indestructible?

“What made you turn to the faith?” I asked her.

“I was 19, and my father had died,” she said. “The question arose as to whether he should be buried according to proper Muslim practice. At that moment I understood that there is an explanation for everything. I asked myself what I could do for him after his death. And in the teachings of Islam, it is clearly written: You must give alms to the poor, perform the hajj and slaughter a he-goat.”

Dina’s apartment complex appeared to date from the 1950s. The brick buildings, along narrow roads and surrounded by tall trees, were old and weathered but beautiful nonetheless, as buildings from bygone eras often are.

She led us up the stairs to the third floor, where her son, Gizzat, who was 7, was waiting along with her husband and her mother. The boy’s father, her first husband, was dead, I eventually gathered.

The apartment was small, consisting of one room in which the adults and the child all slept, a tiny bathroom and a narrow kitchen. But it was warm inside, and Dina no longer seemed wary, as she had earlier that day; she was cheerful and relaxed. After saying goodbye to her mother, who was not staying for dinner, she went into the kitchen to make dinner while her husband, Damir Dolotkazin, spread a prayer mat on the living-room floor and the boy sat on the sofa bed and watched him.

Damir looked as if he was in his late 20s; he was skinny, with short, dark hair and intense but gentle eyes. Barefoot, he stood in the corner of the living room and began to sing. The music, foreign to my ears, filled the room, and I was struck by the way in which it changed the whole apartment. Suddenly the mood grew solemn, but with the everyday routine — Dina cooking, her son on the sofa with his feet dangling, the toy helicopter on top of the bookcase — still present and alive.

Damir knelt and bowed down. As he got to his feet again he whispered an almost silent prayer. Then he rolled up the mat, and the air of solemnity was gone as abruptly as it had come.

From the kitchen, Dina called us in. She ladled a clear soup with pearls of fat, vegetables and chunks of dark meat into our bowls.

The intensity I had initially seen in Damir's eyes proved to be, or turned to, enthusiasm. He ate heartily and willingly answered all my questions.

"Have you always been a Muslim?" I asked him.

"No, no," he said. "I was in the army here in Kazan. I was with a security division that escorted supply troops. I was 18 at the time and a Christian." One of his army friends was a Muslim, Damir went on, and "he taught me what it was about. I thought it was a very strong religion. Everything is explained in its teachings, including what to do, how to act."

There was silence.

"This is very good," I said. "What sort of meat is it?"

"It's horse meat," Damir said.

Oh, no.

Oh, no, oh no.

There was no choice but to carry on eating; we were their guests, and it would have been rude not to eat the food they served us.

Damir must have sensed the air of misgiving that suddenly emanated from his guests, because he said:

"But it was a nice horse!"

We laughed.

"What do people in the West think about Russians?" he asked. "Is it just stereotypes?"

"There are some stereotypes, yes," I said, biting into a large chunk of meat while carefully avoiding breathing through my nose, a trick that had got me through many

childhood meals that I found hard to swallow, like smoked haddock or smoked cod.

“People think we’re barbarians. It’s very sad. What the politicians say and do doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with those of us who live here. There are a lot of good people here, kind souls, and bad people too, of course. When it comes to politics, nothing has really changed. The elections are a joke.”

After dinner, a large tray of Tatar cakes was placed on the table. Damir told us that he used to be a great soccer fan. But then he corrected himself.

“Well, I didn’t really like the soccer. I liked the fighting.”

“You were a soccer hooligan?”

“Yes. I spent three years traveling to soccer matches and fighting. I had some trouble with the law back then. But I no longer have any contact with that scene. Now I read instead. I try to read 20 books a year.”

Once we had eaten and felt that we couldn’t take up any more of their time, we said our goodbyes and were putting on our coats in the tiny hall when he came up to me.

“My sister was killed in a plane crash in 2013,” he said.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said, not knowing what to do with the information.

He simply nodded, and we shook hands. I felt a great warmth toward him; he had told me about his life and this, one of the most important events, couldn’t be left out, even if it didn’t fit the rest of the conversation. The last thing I saw before the door closed behind us was the chair in the living room, over which hung a little boy’s suit, a white shirt and a tie.

The landscape that opened up to either side of us as we left Kazan was flat and wide. The yellows and greens of the vegetation gleamed with lush intensity in the streaming sunlight, and always the Kazanka River was there, sometimes right alongside the road, sometimes far off, sometimes as wide as a great lake, sometimes

narrowing, but always glittering and shimmering in the light, in every possible shade of blue.

It was beautiful, and wild too, although most of the land was cultivated. Maybe the air of wildness came from the scale, I thought, the very sense of earthly grandeur aroused as we drove along in our tiny car.

After a while we stopped at a roadside diner lying out in the middle of a steppe. We all ordered soup at the counter and sat down at one of the tables. The four women working there, all white-clad, with red, hot cheeks, went back and forth between the counter and the kitchen beyond.

Once we had eaten, we asked one of the waitresses if we could talk to her. She nodded uncertainly and dried her hands on her apron. She was young, in her late 20s, and she told us that this was just a temporary job; the restaurant was part of a chain, and she came in to help out when someone was sick. There was something reserved and guarded about her, and when I started asking her about Russia, she shot a glance at the others before answering.

“Things are better in Russia now,” she said. “The economy is improving, our lives are getting better and better.”

“What are you saying?” said a man over at the cash register, looking at us. “Things are worse in Russia! It’s all going downhill! Worse and worse!”

He was big and powerfully built, with close-cropped hair and a pale, flat face.

But he was smiling when he said it.

“No progress,” he boomed and went to sit down at a table in the center of the room. I thanked the reserved young woman, who fled into the kitchen, clearly relieved, as I walked somewhat hesitantly over to the truck driver.

He looked up at me, with his spoon in his hand.

“Why are you writing about Russia?” he said.

“In America, the image of Russia has so much to do with Putin and politics. So we’ve come here to see what life outside of that is like.”

“I’m pleased to meet you!” he said. “Sit down!”

His name was Sergei. He was 44, and he drove a truck carrying cars from a Lada factory to dealers in Kazan.

“I have to work 16 hours a day to make ends meet,” he said. “If you want to live, you have to work. In 2004 I slept four hours a day and worked the rest. Then I had a boss to answer to. Now I work for myself, so at least I can choose my own routes.”

He looked straight at me as he spoke, always with a glint in his eye. A joke was never far away.

“It’s the chance of a lifetime, meeting someone like you,” he said with a laugh. “I got robbed once, would you like to hear about that?”

One evening, 15 years earlier, he had parked his truck outside Moscow and was making tea in the cab. The doors were locked. Suddenly the passenger window was smashed and two men were forcing their way in.

“Luckily only one of them had a knife,” Sergei said. “The first one opened the door, the other climbed in and put a cord around my neck. I held him off with one arm, started the truck and drove it out onto the road to block it and get help that way. The guy who was trying to choke me was in the way of the guy with the knife. That’s what saved me. I managed to open the other door and jump out. Then the guy with the knife stabbed me in the back. I still have the scar.”

“And they took off with the truck?”

“Yes, yes. I just wanted to save myself. I walked along the road, but no one stopped to help. It was hardly surprising, I was half naked and covered in blood. There was no one at the police station. Eventually I came to a house where there was a party, I ran in, grabbed some clothes and ran off again. They found the truck later, abandoned and broken down, minus the load. And I was arrested for stealing the clothes!”

He laughed. His face was constantly in motion, his expression changing in counterpoint to every twist and turn. It was a trait I recognized: He was a storyteller.

He said his grandfather once claimed that he was a Romanov.

“A Romanov?” I said. “As in the imperial family?”

“Oh, yes. I asked my mother about it, but I have never been able to find out for sure.”

That was pretty good luck, I thought. Running into a possible descendant of the czars in a roadside diner in the middle of Russia.

He started to talk about his grandfather.

“He was very strong,” he said, bringing his fist down between us on the table. It was giant.

“His fist was like two of mine. One time he was going to water a calf. It was a hot day, and the air was still. The calf was being bothered by a fly, it kept trying to shake it off.” He raised his head, tossing it about the way the calf had done. “Its head hit Grandfather. He got mad and punched the calf and it dropped down dead. One punch. Dead.”

He paused for a moment to let this story sink in, then he laughed.

“I believe that dreams are real,” he said.

“So do I,” I said.

“You do?”

“Yes.”

“In that case I’ll tell you about a dream I had. I added an extra year to my grandfather’s life in that dream. I had left my father and was living with my grandfather. I loved him very much. One night I dreamed that three men in black hats and black clothes — very mysterious, they looked a little like Georgians — came into our house. They walked right past me and up to my grandfather. They grabbed

hold of him, and he didn't put up a fight, he just went with them. I hung on to him and was dragged along with him, out into the darkness. I couldn't save him, even though I'm strong, too. It was hopeless. I started shouting and screaming. One of the men in black asked, 'Who's that shouting and screaming?' He spotted me, and then he asked: 'How long has he got?' 'One year,' said one of the others, 'for a few good deeds.' And then they disappeared."

The truck driver looked at me.

"One week later Grandfather was taken into intensive care, he was in a coma. I said we didn't need to spend money on doctors, that he would get better. Five days later he woke up. He lived for exactly one more year."

Afterward we stood outside and watched Sergei walk across the forecourt to his long semitrailer in the sunshine. He turned and waved, clambered in, started the grumbling engine, put the truck into gear and drove off.

One thing I most associated with Russia, something I had always wanted to see in real life, was the archetypal sort of village found in 19th-century Russian novels and historical photographs. A huddle of wooden cottages, often unpainted, some wooden fences, some vegetable plots, a few chickens running around, perhaps a shady grove of trees nearby, a lazily flowing river, surrounded by endless fields. Many times on this trip, I saw villages like this in the distance, first on the way to Turgenev's estate and later alongside the railroad line to Kazan. So, on this particular day, when a cluster of houses suddenly appeared just after the crest of a little hill, right there by the highway, I turned onto the rutted side road, stopped the car and got out.

The village seemed deserted except for a solitary old lady, bent over double working in a vegetable plot. Brown talked with her, and it appeared that there was a woman living in the village who was 102 years old.

"Can we meet her?" I said.

Brown asked the woman, who nodded and pointed out the direction.

We walked over to a bright, blue house with a woman in a head scarf moving around outside it. In her arms she held a large white hen that was struggling to get free.

While Brown talked to her, a young rooster sped by with another in hot pursuit. The chase ended in a ball of feathers a little farther off.

“We’ve been invited in,” Brown said.

I stepped over the high threshold and into the hallway. It smelled slightly sour and musty inside, but it was pleasant and warm. There were rugs everywhere, both on the floors and on the walls. It felt like entering a cave.

In the middle of the living room stood a very old woman. As we entered, she turned her head slowly and looked at us.

The woman who had followed us in bustled past, led the old lady over to a bed that was pushed up against the wall, sat her down, removed her head scarf and put on a fresh one, then slipped a pair of leather slippers onto her feet.

It was almost as if she were dressing a doll. But the old woman didn’t seem to mind. She sat perfectly still with her hands in her lap, watching us.

She wore a black dress patterned with roses. The white head scarf was big; it not only covered her head but also fell all the way down her back. Her name was Minizaitunya Ibyatullina.

I walked over to her and gently shook her hand. It was dry and warm. She said something as she looked up at me.

“She’s speaking Tatar,” Brown said. “I don’t know what she’s saying.”

Minizaitunya slowly turned her head toward the camera as Addario started taking photographs of her. Her son, Kasym, stood in the doorway, smiling and looking on. His wife, whose name was Alfiya, produced a large laminated photograph from a drawer and handed it to the old woman. It was of a soldier, and she held it up in front of herself.

This was a photograph of Minizaitunya's husband, who died in the war in 1943, in Ukraine. He was a very beautiful man. How odd it must be for her, I thought, to look at that picture of him, 70 years later, with him so young and handsome and her now 102.

She didn't appear to think anything of it. She looked proud, sitting there holding his picture.

It must have been odd for her son too. He was 80, more than twice as old as his father was when he died.

Kasym had lived in the village all his life. It had been a collective farm under the Soviet Union. He had worked as a carpenter, he told us. His mother had also worked all her life.

She said something in a soft voice, and her son bent down to her.

"She says she's too old to work now," he said. "She doesn't have the strength for it."

"What sort of work did she do?"

"She worked on the collective farm. Milking the cows and other chores."

Alfiya came into the living room and invited us to come to the table. She had been baking while we were there: On the table was a platter holding a warm flat loaf and several sorts of jam. There were only two chairs, and there could be no talk of either of them sitting down. The wife poured tea, the husband presented a large bag of hard candy and when I made no move to help myself, he took out three pieces and laid them next to my plate.

From the living room came the sound of soft, slow footsteps.

"The babushka's coming!" Alfiya said. Seconds later Minizaitunya appeared in the doorway. Her son escorted her over to another bed, where she sat and watched us while we ate.

She was born in 1915. Russia was still a monarchy then, and Nicholas II still ruled. So she had seen the old czardom, the revolution, the rise and fall of the Soviet Union and, now, the new Russia.

Alfiya put some fresh bread in a bag for us, Kasym gave us some bags of candy, and each of us was also presented with a small embroidered cloth to take with us. Even Minizaitunya had gifts for us: a bar of soap for Brown, scarves for Addario and me.

“All of the people I grew up with are dead,” she said from her seat on the bed when we were on our feet and about to leave. “There’s no one left.”

I never look anyone straight in the eye for more than a few seconds at a time. I don’t want to intrude on anyone, and maybe I don’t want them to intrude on me. But once I had shaken everyone’s hand in farewell that afternoon and was standing there looking at her and she looked back at me, I thought that I ought to hold her gaze, that I should look into her eyes. Those eyes that had seen the world during the time of the czars and seen the world for a hundred years after that.

We looked at each other for a long time. At first she seemed surprised, as if she were wondering what I was up to, but then, slowly, she began to smile, and it was so wonderful, that smile, that there were tears in my eyes a moment later when we walked out the door and left the house.

The final day of our journey to Yekaterinburg was a 15-hour drive. Near the end of the journey, in the middle of a deep forest that was still about an hour’s drive from the city, I pulled onto a side road, stopped by a river and smoked a cigarette under the starry sky, right next to what I guessed was a pulp mill. Addario and Brown were asleep, and I thought about what lay ahead in the morning. The killing of the czar and his family in that cellar in Yekaterinburg was an earth-shattering event, a replay of the French Revolution, but for Lenin it must also have been a personal matter. He must have been full of hatred as a 17-year-old wandering through Kazan, hatred of the czar who had executed his brother, and it is not hard to imagine this personal hatred making him all the more steely and intransigent. After the revolution in 1917, when he assumed responsibility for the czar, who was by then

in captivity, he must have thought of his brother, how he could avenge him. And do what his brother had once tried to do: kill the czar.

A set of headlights flickered farther in among the trees. I followed them with my eyes as they drew closer. When the lights lit up the car I was leaning against, they slowed down. A faint unease welled up inside me. I had heard stories about violent robberies in the towns nearby. But then whoever it was sped past. I stepped on my cigarette, got into our car and drove back onto the main road. It was probably just some bored teenagers out for a ride, I thought. And you could understand why, out here where there was nothing but trees and water.

In Yekaterinburg the next day we drove by a big crowd in a square, several hundred people carrying flags and shouting. We all turned to look as we passed.

“What are they protesting?” Addario asked.

“There are demonstrations all over the country today,” Brown said. “In support of the imprisoned opposition leader Aleksei Navalny. It’s Putin’s birthday today.”

“Really?” I said, but a moment later I had forgotten the demonstration, because we were approaching the Church on the Blood, which sat on the actual spot where the legendary czar’s story ended. It also housed something that, to me, was just as much the stuff of legend — an authentic Orthodox church service, which, thanks to all the Russian novels I had read, not least the works of Dostoyevsky, was bathed in a special light. This was the selfless light of mercy, associated not only with the highest and richest but also with the lowest and poorest. In Dostoyevsky’s books, there is something morbid about this light, a frenzied, exhausting quality, which I have always regarded as typically Russian. I’ve certainly never observed it anywhere else.

We got out of the car and stood in the rain, looking up at the church.

I knew right away that I would not be realizing any kind of Dostoyevskian vision. The church had been built in the traditional style, with multiple shining domes, but it was clearly brand new. Looking at it gave me the same strange feeling I had once in Warsaw Old Town, where the buildings destroyed in World War II, many of which were centuries old, had been replaced with pristine replicas. It was

like flickering through a glitch in time. The old was not old, the new was not new. So where were we?

On the night of July 16, 1918, as the story goes, the czar's family was awoken and told that they were being taken to a safer location. They came down from their rooms and were asked to wait in the cellar. They had no idea what was about to happen until the guns were raised against them. The revolutionaries who made up the firing squad were amateurs; some of them were drunk. The shots hit the family at random, the floor ran with blood, the air was thick with smoke, there must have been screaming and banging and confusion, several members of the family lay bleeding, but alive, on the floor, until they were finally killed with shots directly to the head. The bodies were then driven out of the town, and attempts were made to render their faces unrecognizable with acid before they were thrown down a mine shaft. Some days later, they were brought up again, transported to a nearby forest and buried there.

The house was gone, the cellar was gone, the blood and the bodies were gone. But the Romanovs weren't gone. In the Church on the Blood, they had returned, as symbols. Those crazed and bloody minutes, and all that they represented, had now been subsumed into reliquary forms that promised the opposite: foresight, structure, harmony, balance.

At the entrance to the church stood a sculpture of the whole Romanov family, made in the same heroic-realist style that Soviet artists used to depict the workers of the 1920s and 1930s. Inside the church hung icons in which Nicholas II was portrayed in the manner of the Middle Ages. Almost everything in the church involved a distortion of time. The ritual and repetition of the services abolished time entirely, linking the time within that chamber to divine time, which was eternal, unaffected by life or death, which was always there, which lasted forever. The czar and his family were lifted into this room, and the story with which they were associated disappeared, traceless. And yet Lenin existed in a similar space. Lying embalmed in his mausoleum on Red Square, his body was real and bound to the moment, but there was nothing about the body that connected him to the time when he held sway; he, too, was simultaneously inside and outside time.

History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake, Joyce wrote. Nowhere was that truer than Russia.

The next morning at the airport in Yekaterinburg, while I was waiting for my flight back to Moscow, I looked through the day's papers on my phone. There had been demonstrations against Putin and his government in all the major cities the day before. Particular mention was made of the demonstration in Yekaterinburg, the one we saw on our way to the church, because the police detained 24 demonstrators there.

My first thought was that I should have been there, that this was the place where it was all happening, that this was what I should have gone to see in order to present the best possible picture of modern Russia.

Then I thought: no.

Stories have always held Russia together, and what makes them different from most other countries' nation-building stories, perhaps, is the authoritarian nature of the stories themselves: One story has been paramount while all that deviate from it have been forbidden. So it was under the czars, who censored books and newspapers; so it was under Lenin. And so it still is today — reporters in Russia are regularly imprisoned and sometimes simply murdered.

And yet the alternative stories, the ones the authorities did not want to see gaining a foothold, the ones that told of abuse of power and oppression, of living in a dictatorship where all hope for the future was gone — these too had become standardized.

The demonstration was what the international newspapers reported about Russia the day before, and their stories confirmed and reinforced the larger story about a downtrodden people in a totalitarian state. But behind this reality there was another reality as well. The three lively women on the train; Dina and Damir, the young couple in Kazan with a baby on the way; Sergei the truck driver; the old, old woman in the village and the elderly couple who cared for her — which story about Russia could contain all of them without, at the same time, drastically reducing what was unique to each of them?

Turgenev's stories could. The characters in them do not lead to anything beyond themselves. But the world as it is can't exist without its twin, the world as we want it to be. Lenin, the oppressor, read Turgenev all through his life, and Vladimir Putin revealed his love for "A Sportsman's Sketches" in an interview from 2011, when he said: "The main character, in a simple but picturesque and very sympathetic way, tells stories about people he met while hunting, and their lives. They are a sort of sketches on Russia's heartland of the mid-19th century that provide food for thought and allow us to see our country, its traditions and national psychology in a new light."

Later that afternoon, at a hotel bar in Moscow, I met Sergei Lebedev, a 36-year-old novelist and journalist who lately had emerged as a civic activist. I was feeling as curious about the man himself as I was about his writing, as intrigued by his family background as by his knowledge of the country's history. He was born in 1981, I knew, and so was just old enough to have spent the first part of his childhood in the Soviet Union and his youth in the chaotic years after its demise. I also knew that he had originally been a geologist.

"I was born into a classic Soviet family," he said once we had taken our seats at a table near a window looking out onto the street. "Both my parents were geologists; they were members of the Soviet intelligentsia."

He was short and stocky, with a stubbly beard, and there was something indomitable about him that made me think about an animal that won't let go of something when it gets its teeth into it. Lebedev's books dealt with history — it lay like a shadow over everything he wrote — and the fact that its presence was so powerful suggested that the conflicts and tensions inherent in it were still unresolved, still had a bearing on Russian society in obscure yet palpable ways.

Lebedev told me that everything in his childhood was designed to keep parts of the past hidden from him. His great-grandfather had, for example, been an officer in the czar's army before he switched sides and joined the Red Army. But in the family's version of events, he had always worn the Red Army's cape with its red star, as if he had been born in 1917 and there had been nothing before that.

“For me that was normal,” he said. “To live in an incomplete world. To live in a world full of holes. With all these questions that could never be asked.”

The street outside was lit by the rays of the low October sun and busy with people strolling through the town on this Sunday afternoon. Many of them must have had stories similar to Lebedev’s, I thought. There is a mechanism in people that stops us from talking about bad experiences and makes us reluctant to stir up the past. But secrets foster a specific version of reality in which the individual pieces have to be arranged in a particular way, fitting so neatly together that if just one were to change position, the whole picture would fall apart. Our identity is shaped by stories, about our own history, about our family’s history, about the history of our people or our country. What happens when one of these identity-shaping stories doesn’t fit? Suddenly you are not who you thought you were. And then who are you?

I asked him what the narrative in Russia was like now.

“It’s very strange,” he replied. “First of all, it is important to understand that the authorities have no single, coherent ideology. They use elements from all sorts of different fields: If it works, they’ll take it. They need a smoke screen to hide the fact that they’re nothing but a bunch of kleptocrats. Take, for example, the name of the United Russia party. Those words, a ‘united Russia,’ were a slogan of the counterrevolutionaries, coined in reaction to Lenin and the Bolsheviks, who wished to establish new, self-governing republics. The current administration is building a state founded on Soviet nostalgia, but they have no qualms about appropriating an opposition slogan. And it’s not the slightest bit controversial.”

He went on: “With each year that passes they try to reduce the significance of 1917. They do this because in their ideal version of events there was no revolution! They are trying to establish an unbroken link between the czars and Stalin’s Russia. According to the current narrative, foreign spies and traitors provoked us into killing one another a hundred years ago. That must never happen again. Therefore we have to stand together, therefore we must all follow Putin’s banner, therefore we must forbid all opposition, therefore we must even sacrifice our civil rights, because it must never happen again. That’s roughly how it goes.”

Afterward, we walked across town to the Kremlin. The streets were full of people, the sky was clear blue and the sun's rays fell unhindered on the city, bright where they glinted off windows and car hoods, softer and richer where they shone on storefronts and walls, roads and pavement, and always with a fiery tinge to them.

Lebedev led the way past the Bolshoi Theater, pointing and explaining as we walked along. The square in front of the theater's magnificent neoclassical facade was dominated by several parked police buses and the police officers and police dogs standing near them.

"Riot police," Lebedev said. "There were demonstrations here yesterday, so they're worried and want to make sure nothing happens."

Dense crowds of people milled around the stalls and the profusion of food and drink. The mood was light, people were smiling and laughing, children running around the feet of the adults, the sun shining on faces, and behind us, stark against the deep blue sky, reared the towers of the Kremlin.

"It's a celebration of the harvest," Lebedev said. "It's so typical of Putin and the government. They invest in nonpolitical events and public meeting places like this. Here it's all about pumpkins! They're trying to invent new traditions, and this is meant as a display of Russia's riches."

We continued walking, to Revolution Square, which under the czars was called Resurrection Square. "As you can see, there's no trace of the revolution here," Lebedev said. "The centenary is hardly being celebrated at all; certainly there's no discussion of the violence, the atrocities. But if you are to understand what happened in this country in the '20s and '30s, you cannot ignore the violence and the horrors of the five years from 1917 to 1921. You cannot understand why people were so willing to slaughter one another. There has been a sort of a war fought over memories in Russia, over what should be remembered and what should be forgotten. History today is all about symbols, not about notions of mutual forgiveness and reconciliation.

"But wait till you see this, in here," he said, pointing to the entrance to a metro station. The escalator we stepped onto was steep and long, and in the underworld to

which it carried us, time seemed to have stood still.

Placed on a series of platforms along the walls were huge, heroic bronze statues of human figures. The first of them bore rifles and cartridge belts; these were the revolutionaries. But then came the ordinary people, men and women, young and old, peasants, fishermen, factory workers — the whole exquisite, mesmerizing series ending with a child held aloft, a symbol of the future.

Oh, it was so full of hope and faith that the knowledge that it was propaganda no longer mattered, because this was a vision of a life, of a land, of a future, and it was not untrue, just beautiful.

This, too, was the revolution, the dream of a better life for all. All the art from that time shares this same energy, an almost wild optimism, a sense that this is where it begins. Women are as much in the vanguard as men, not sexualized or objectivized, but there in their own right. The artists are experimenting; this is the age of Mayakovsky, Eisenstein, Kandinsky. As well as killing, violence, ruthlessness, hunger, want, misery and, in due course, a system that became ossified, closed to the world, trapped by its own truths. The underground station was the most beautiful place I saw during my days in Russia, but the beauty could not be used for anything, bound up as it was with concepts of reality that no one believed in anymore and that could never, therefore, be realized.

And yet neither did that make it a lie. The statue of the czar outside the Church on the Blood was a lie, because it changed the past. These statues were meant to change the future. The fact that this future was never realized, that it never came to pass, did not make this subterranean vision untrue; it just made it vain and beautiful. Few things are more beautiful than vain hope.

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