Preface

Russia, and later Soviet Union presents a special fascination to the western observer. A fascination especially to a Swede for whom the interaction reaches back at least half a millenium into the past, and is thus not only due to the period of the Cold War spanning a mere decades.

Russia occupies the middle ground. An alien peripheral power to the western mainstream of the European tradition, it is nevertheless not part of the East. At least not in the same way as the Ottoman empire was not to mention the distant China past or present. Its Christianity links it with the West, while its frozen landlocked location makes it somehow Asian edging into Europe.

With the Swedes there were a succession of wars, too many and too inconsequential to be repeated here. There main effect was to stave off the Russians from their advance to the Baltic. But with the campaign of Peter the Great things were overturned within just a few years in the beginning of the 18^{th} century. Russia replaced Sweden as the Northern Player in European Power Politics, transforming itself from obscurity to a menace. One hundred years later Russian soldiers were in Paris. Russia became the backward giant, tolerated but never fully accepted in the European House.

However with the turn of this century its prestige as a power started to wane. It suffered a humiliating loss against the upstart Japanese in 1905, and it armies were crushed by the Germans ten years later. It withdrew into itself, its tidal advance retreated, leaving stranded on the fringes of its crumbling empire a string of new independent states.

However reborn as the Soviet Union, it aroused renewed suspicion (as well as spurious enthusiasm) and fear in the West, and during the polarization of the Cold War, it was demonized as the “Evil Empire”. An inhuman empire bent on ultimate worldwide conquest and suppression. Still it is tempting to speculate on its ultimate sources. How much was due to historical prejudice viewing the Russians as a "Mongolian" hordes anathema to Western Enlightment, and how much was due to distaste for its ostensible ideology? The Communist ideology was seen as perversive and alien in the West (with proper regard for dissenting opinions that sometimes reached the proportions of fads), although of course it is a legitimate child of western tradition and thought. The truth is as usual somewhere between, it is hard to separate the various strands of purely ideological distaste and natio-racial prejudice, each type of strand reinforcing the other. This is illustrated in my own personal case by my being surprised and somewhat touched when I learned as a child that the Russians did honor and acknowledge Marx, a westerner and a German to boot, having been brought up in the tradition that the Russians always usurped major achievments, scientifical as well as others, as their own.

I went to Russia the first time in 1968. It was as a participant in the high-school Olympiade of Mathematics. I went with some trepidation viewing myself as being at the mercy of a malevolent regime, and returned somewhat mollified. I had seen much poverty, which at that time was still something not widely known, and been touched by the people, the arrangements, the material deprivations. The demonic cardboard view was somehow no longer appropriate. A few years later I got entranced by the great Russian writers, and was close to falling into the opposite trap of idyllizing the Russian psyche as somehow more soulful than others.

The inhumanity of the Soviet regime should never be denied. It is amply documented, and its excesses during the Stalinist regime (which did not commence with Stalin) rivals those committed by the Nazis, and outnumbers those as far as sheer numbers are concerned. Yet one should not forget that it was basically human. Human in the sense of all too human. The atrocities were not committed by devils (although each country regardless of political system has its shares of psychopaths that readily lends themselves to do the dirty work as long as it is there to be done) but by ordinary humans motivated sometimes by zeal but often by fear and greed. Human, all too human qualities. The ominous sense of power exercisec by the regime owes much to its anonymity and facelessness. But it was exercised by humans, sometimes petty, sometimes despotic. There was Yeltsin, the tough party-boss of Sverdlovsk, and many many others, like him. Now when the trappings have crumbled, you find them in other functions. Not everyone can be a President like Yeltsin himself, but there is always room for entrepreuners and capitalists. The coats of ideology are easily switched as we all know.

Once again, the Russian empire has crumbled, retreating into itself, leaving on its deserted shores new strings of newly independant states. The Russians who just a few years ago were feared and viled, are now good guys if somewhat inept in the condescending eyes of the West. One wonders how long this rather absurd honeymoon will last. The present humiliation cannot last forever.

This notes, in the shape of a diary, reflect my uncensured and undigested impressions that I recieved upon my second visit to Russia. As my itenerary this time was totaly disjoint from my previous (I then saw Moscow and Leningrad) I cannot make direct comparisons. Also the views and attitudes of a teen-ager is also quite different from those of a middle-aged man. The pretext for such an excursion was the bi-annual conference in Yaroslavl' organised superbly by Alexander Tikhomirov, a person the reader will meet many a time in the pages to follow, who graciously accepted my participation. It gave me an opportunity to meet many Russians that I would ordinarily not have met, but basically I felt that it was a bit too late. I should have gone ten or fifteen years earlier when Russian mathematics was at its height, and when many of the big names were imprisoned within its expansive borders. Then the encounter would have been far more striking and significant in the shadows of the Cold war. Now the Russian elite is dispersed, you meet them in the West, unfettered and divorced from their proper soil, for better or for worse. Nostalgia works for anything that is irretrievably lost, good or bad, it does not really matter.

I will refrain to make any comments on the pages to follow, they will speak for themselves. I took copious notes, and my ambition has been to include as much as possible and reject no incident no matter how insignificant, in the hope of trying to recreate as faithfully as possible the sense of getting there and being there. Whether I have to some extent succeded is up to the reader to judge.

Göteborg

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