Michael Makin
New Moscow, Old Heartland – Contrasts of Russia Today

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Russia is by far the largest country in the world, stretching from central Europe to the Pacific, and from the Caucasus and Central Asia to the Arctic seas.
Some Basic Facts

- **Size?**
  - 6,592,800 sq. miles (about as big as the US and Canada combined). Eleven time zones.
- **When it is 2 pm in New York, what time is in Moscow?**
  - 10 pm
- **When it is 2 pm in New York, what time is it in Vladivostok?**
  - 6 am the next day (and it’s 8 am on Kamchatka)!
- **Languages?**
  - Russian (and over one hundred others)
- **Peoples?**
  - Ethnic Russians and over one hundred other nationalities.
Big Cities

• Capital?
• Moscow – about nine million people, plus six more million in surrounding cities
• Other big cities
• St Petersburg – nearly five million, Nizhnii Novgorod – one-and-a-half million
  Novosibirsk – one-and-a-half million
In terms of economic might and cultural power, it is a highly centralized country. Moscow, in particular, and, to a lesser degree, St Petersburg dominate. It is said that about 70% of the country’s money passes through Moscow, a city of fewer than ten million in a country of nearly 150 million.

The cultural, political, and economic dominance of St Petersburg and, especially, Moscow are obvious. And as soon as we cross the boundaries of those cities we enter the “provinces” – that is, the entire rest of the country.
Hence this is one of the classic images of the country – *Russia as the Kremlin*. 
Moscow, the capital and heart of Russia
The city’s power, splendor, pride, and eccentricity are all stated clearly on Red Square, with the extravagant statement of St Basil’s (as this famous church is often called), next to the statue of Minin and Pozharsky, who led resistance to the Poles during the Time of Troubles in the early seventeenth century, and not far from the ancient site of execution.
The Bolsheviks returned the capital from Petersburg to Moscow, and transformed the city, building the famous “wedding cake” high-rises – this one is pictured in the evening from the second floor of the Udarnik (Shock-worker) cinema, near the Kremlin.
But with the end of Soviet power, Moscow was transformed again – a boom town, full of prosperous people (even if the majority remain of relatively modest means). In fact, the second floor of the Udarnik now houses a fashionable Japanese restaurant (one of many in the city), while there is a casino on the first. Moscow is said to have the best night life in Europe, and it certainly must have the most construction sites.
Images of the new Russia, and its sources of wealth, are familiar enough, and anyone who has visited Moscow will have quickly become aware of the remarkable prosperity of parts of the capital.
The new Russia has brought a new Russian language too, where words like коттэдж (kottedzh) and мерин (merin – gelding) can mean quite different things from what the foreigner might expect.

That new Russian language, and that new Russia can be seen everywhere on the streets of Moscow, and everywhere around the city limits, where gigantic and very expensive houses are being built.
For Moscow’s newly prosperous classes, the city is full of places of entertainment, often expensive. Vacations are taken in European resorts, summer and winter; on Bali, in the Maldives…
There are some surprising fashions among Russia’s fashionable couples – domestic karaoke machines are popular (as, of course, are tennis courts, swimming pools, and stables).
Even the lives of the less obviously very prosperous Muscovites and Petersburgers are now often quite comfortable.
And if big-city apartment life can still be cramped for many, there is always the *dacha*
But the rest of the country can seem very different.

By the way, this view of the (only) road to the village of Makachevo, northern Vologda region, was taken in October.
This (like countless similar views across the entire country) is also a defining image of the country – in this case, it is of the Monastery of St Trifon in Vyatka (Kirov)
But these “heartland images” are in every way remote from Moscow. Distance, poor roads, and uneven economic development add to the social and geographical divisions of Russia.
Small and medium-sized Russian towns have their charms, but their residents are acutely aware of what they do not have, and Muscovites and Petersburgers are likely to shudder at the very word провинция (provinces).
Bad roads are the classic complaint of travellers and of locals in the provinces. Here are three modes of transport in and near Vytegra, northern Vologda oblast’. The Land Rover belongs to the town’s major new entrepreneur.
In the new Russia, some of the elderly are clearly left behind – in the provinces, the poorest people are also the oldest
But even in these rather remote and impoverished areas, the “new Russia” is evident. Not only in the entrepreneur’s Land Rover, but also in this church, in the small nearby village of Andomskii Pogost. Its construction is being sponsored by a local ‘New Russian’, and its eclectic vernacular style is as eloquent as are the myriad ‘cottages’ around Moscow and Petersburg.
Meanwhile, the Old Russia struggles to survive – here we see not so much living folklore, as the efforts of a school in Vytegra (population 13,000) to maintain its ethnography program with virtually no money.
Village schools are even worse off, but work very hard to produce results with minimal resources. Many such schools have no plumbing, but they may now have computer class rooms (although the electricity is likely to fail on a regular basis).
Here is a very characteristic phenomenon of the Russian countryside – a dying village (Koshtugi, near Vytegra)
While this is what remains of the village church (it was used as a barn for many years, before being reconsecrated in the 1990s).
Many of the houses are used only in the summer, and the majority of the population is elderly.

The school survives – just – but will probably be closed soon.
In the nineteenth century well over a thousand people lived here.

Now there are about one hundred residents.
Another very characteristic view of provincial Russia

This is Kargopol’, in southern Archangel region, which was a very prosperous town in the early modern period
The twentieth century passed Kargopol’ by.
Since the railway did not come through town, it has remained much the same as it was 100 years ago: a town of 13,000 with no city water, heating, or sewage system.

At the home of the poet Alexander Loginov

He caught the fish himself, and his modern apartment is heated by an old-fashioned stove.
And we return to the same theme of geographical determinants – this is the main road from Vytegra to Kargopol’ in October 2002
Some Suggestions for Reading:

History


Russia Today


Figes, Orlando *Natasha’s Dance – a Cultural History of Russia* (Metropolitan Books, New York, 2002). A very engaging and well-written history of Russian culture (the title refers to Natasha Rostova, a Russian noblewoman in Tolstoi’s *War and Peace*, dancing a peasant dance at one (characteristically didactic) moment in the novel).


Russian Literature and Culture Today


*Glas: New Russian Writing* (1991-). This almanac publishes some very interesting and mostly recent writing in translation. Of particular interest to participants might be no 15, which consists of a translation of *Peter Aleshkovsky’s Skunk: a Life*. This novella is set in the Russian north, and is quite informative about the place of that part of Russia in the modern cultural imagination. Also of considerable interest might be no 17, consisting of a selection of stories by *Lyudmila Ulitskaya*, one of Russia’s best contemporary female authors.

*Pelevin, Viktor* *Homo Zapiens*, translated by Andrew Bromfield (Viking, New York, 2002). The latest novel by one of Russia’s most popular contemporary writers to be translated into English. A fantastic, satiric novel about a very ordinary Russian *intelligent* who becomes a very successful advertising copywriter, and makes some very interesting discoveries about contemporary society and politics along the way.

Films --

*Prisoner of the Mountains*, 1996. The film was produced by Boris Giller and Sergei Bodrov, and directed by the latter. The script was written by Arif Aliev, Sergei Bodrov, and Boris Giller. The story draws heavily upon Lev Tolstoi’s story of the same name (1872). The general topics – the Russian encounter with the Caucasus; the romance, intrigue, and danger of that encounter; the appeal of the “natural” native woman to the Russian soldier/officer; the eventual revelation of the failure of romantic and other stereotypes, and so on – are commonplaces of nineteenth century Russian writing. But the film is set in the Caucasus of today (although no specific locations are ever named), and the two soldiers who are captured in an ambush by guerrilla fighters are very clearly modern Russians. They fall into the hands of the head of a family which inhabits a remote and striking mountain village. The intention is to swap them for the man’s son, held by the Russians, but attempts at exchanges fail. Meanwhile, the mother of one of the soldiers comes to the area in an attempt to save her son (echoing the journeys of many mothers seeking news of their sons in the Chechen conflict). She finds the local Russian command corrupt and indifferent, but still attempts to rescue her son. Meanwhile, the two Russian soldiers encounter many aspects of mountain life, and seem at several moments to be in mortal danger. The daughter of the man who holds them forms a friendship with the younger soldier, and the cautious development of their relationship is pursued for much of the film.
**Brother**, 1997, is one of the most popular Russian films of recent years. The director and script-writer Alexei Balabanov claims that the film was a “no-budget project”, in which he gave the young Sergei Bodrov, fresh from his success in *Prisoner of the Mountains*, a new vehicle for his talent. According to Balabanov, much of the film was shot in the apartments of his friends. **Danila Bagrov** has just finished his military service (working, he claims, as a clerk at HQ, although his conduct throughout the film hardly fits such a profile). He returns to his home town with no great plans or interests, beyond listening as much as possible to his favourite group, **Nautilus Pompilius**, one of the most popular bands of the early nineties. Circumstances and his mother’s nagging, however, direct him to **St Petersburg**, where his elder brother has become a “big man” (their father, a local criminal, is long dead from a prison fight). It turns out that his brother is a professional assassin, working in a strange alliance with another criminal called the Round One. Danila is recruited (and set up) by his brother **Viktor**, whom he quickly surpasses. But Danila often acts according to a higher moral code, for example, protecting an impoverished stallholder, Hoffman (whom Danila nicknames “**German**”) from a thug attempting to collect tribute at the market, and forcing two arrogant North Caucasians from the bus when they refuse to pay their fare. His journey through the chaotic, criminalized world of mid-90s Petersburg also introduces him to two women, **Sveta**, the driver of an always empty freight tram (which rattles across the cityscape a number of times), whose husband regularly beats her up, and the young **Kate** (the nickname is explicitly English in the original), whose main occupations seem to be hanging out and taking drugs. Danila deals effectively with every threat and challenge, but remains an isolated figure to the end of the film. The film makes much of the look of St Petersburg, and explicitly introduces a whole series of motifs and types from the literary mythology of the city, while also giving the viewer a very heady mixture of gangster movie, vigilante story, and portrayal of the harsh realities of post-Soviet society. The script is economical and witty, the filming elegant, and the editing seductive in pace and in its sharp visual and emotional contrasts.
Web Sites

The Internet offers many possibilities for exploring Russia. Even quite small Russian towns often have interesting and useful web sites, sometimes with English translation. A lot of general tourist information is also available. A good place for the English-speaking surfer to begin is the web site of the Russian Department at Bucknell College (http://www.departments.bucknell.edu/russian/index.html).

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More locally, note our own sites:

http://www.lsa.umich.edu/slavic/

http://www.umich.edu/stpetersburg/index2.html

http://www.umich.edu/~iinet/crees/

http://www-personal.umich.edu/~resco/index.html

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