The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Stuck in the 1930s

By Alexei Bayer

November 13, 2011



When I came to the United States from the Soviet Union in the mid-1970s, I was a little disappointed. Only when I got to Chicago a decade later did I see the America I had expected: smelters in Gary, Indiana, still majestic even if rusty and abandoned; old bridges, the marvels of industrial-era engineering; whimsical skyscrapers downtown; the art-deco splendor of the Lake Shore Drive; the jazz clubs; and the strict North-South segregation. For me, this was the "real" America.

Later, I figured out why. The Midwest was devastated by the Great Depression, and its capital, Chicago, never fully regained its spirit, in many ways remaining stuck in the early 1930s.

Growing up under communism, we were also living in the 1930s, when the Iron Curtain came down and isolated the Soviet Union from the rest of the world. Very little information reached us, contact with foreigners was tightly controlled and almost no one could travel abroad. Few contemporary books and even fewer Western films made it to the Soviet Union.

Instead, we learned about the United States from Jack London, Upton Sinclair, John Steinbeck

and Theodor Dreiser. Ernest Hemingway, a writer of the World War I "lost generation," became an ultramodern sensation in the Soviet Union in the early 1960s. Robert Penn Warren's "All the King's Men" was translated into Russian in the 1970s and was read as a portrait of the contemporary United States, even though it had been written in 1946 and described events of the 1930s.

Being isolated for 60 years, the Soviet Union missed post-World War II social, economic and political developments. We were excluded from the economic boom of the 1950s, which showed people in the West that prosperity is not a zero-sum game in which one person's gain must come at the loss of another. We missed out on the liberal postwar era. European social democracy passed us by. We did not experience the counterculture of the 1960s, which undermined respect for government authority. Nor did we learn much about the civil rights struggle, except for the exaggerated official propaganda about how U.S. blacks were persecuted.

As a political culture, we were stuck in the 1930s, with all the mean-spirited, bloody-minded, violence-loving characteristics of that dreadful decade, which has been aptly named the Age of the Dictators. It was a profoundly anti-democratic era, in which murderous demagogues like Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin and Benito Mussolini attacked liberal democracy and stoked mass hatred for class, race and national enemies.

This may explain the astonishing fact that recent Russian emigres instinctively take the most illiberal, undemocratic and intransigent positions on the political spectrum of their new countries. In Israel, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman and his Russian-speaking party are irreconcilable enemies of peace with Palestinians, whereas in the United States ex-Soviet Jews tend to vote for extreme Republicans. This is true even of highly educated people, which distinguishes them from most of their Western colleagues.

But the greatest damage of the persistent 1930s political culture is seen in Russia, where Western-style liberal democracy is now widely despised. As a result, Russia has now fallen under the spell of another "strong leader" and has seen its nascent freedoms severely curtailed.

The only hope is that the new generation, growing up in much closer contact with the outside world, has caught up with their Western counterparts and will be able to create a different society in Russia once the Soviet generation has left the scene.

Alexei Bayer, a native Muscovite, is a New York-based economist.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/11/13/stuck-in-the-1930s-a10751