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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

History Repeated Itself as Farce in 2012

By Roland Oliphant

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Balloons reading “Free Pussy Riot” floating over anti-Kremlin protesters. **Igor Tabakov**

Two hundred years ago this month, the miserable shreds of Napoleon's Grande Armee shuffled out of Russian territory, thanking their lucky stars they had made it safely home and vowing never, ever to try that again.

Those sentiments were shared by survivors of this year's re-enactment of the Battle of Borodino and the immense traffic jams that left thousands stranded on the battlefield.

It was a helpful reminder that history tends to repeat itself as farce rather than tragedy.

We got a new-old president, but were denied the thrill of a new era because he is as familiar and unexciting as the buckwheat served at your office canteen.

An aircraft vanished, a monastery was caught running brothels and the white ribbon — or was it a condom? — was briefly the must-have accessory on Moscow's streets.

The fad of the year was the political opposition as entertainment. Right up until summer

the best fun in town — and the only place to be seen — was being chased around the boulevard ring by tired riot cops.

Things reached a peak of farce in May, when opposition leader and anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny led a small army in a kind of all-night waltz with the OMON around Kitai-Gorod. If you were drinking in Jan Jaques, you had a good chance of a riot cop spilling your drink. And if you were lucky you could win the instant glamour of getting thrown in the same police van as socialite Ksenia Sobchak.

It was a good year for Ksenia. She confirmed her awkward reinvention from reality TV host to opposition leader with a series of bona-fide arrests and — honor of honors — a police raid on her apartment in June.

The police found her in a negligee and over a million euros in cash. They returned her money in September.

With a dress code somewhere between Northern Irish terrorism and gay pride, the Pussy Riot rockers pushed the boundaries of good taste — and landed themselves in jail.

The court case that somehow came to compete for global attention with the Syrian civil war — despite a strange prudishness in some quarters about the name of the band. The New York Times for a while let its writers refer to Pussy Riot only as "a feminist punk band." A White House spokesman went red when journalists in Washington bullied him into saying it on camera.

It was a public relations disaster for the Moscow Patriarchate, which ended up as the villains bullying three young women.

The church's year only got worse when a hotel-by-the-hour was discovered operating out of the Sretensky Monastery, which is headed by Archimandrite Tikhon, supposedly Vladimir Putin's personal spiritual adviser. The house of disrepute was actually operating out of a building the monastery had recently bought, and the police simply helped evict the previous tenants. At least that was Tikhon's story, and he was sticking to it.

Speaking of monasteries, unsubstantiated rumors said a certain gymnast had moved to Cyprus with the children she had with her married lover. Get thee to a nunnery, indeed. Or a Mediterranean tax haven.

But neither the balaclava-clad ladies of Pussy Riot nor the white ribbons to which they are linked by an umbilical cord have caused Putin half as much trouble as his own ill-advised flight with endangered cranes, the strain of which apparently got the better of him.

His spokesman still insists the "old sports injury" is not affecting his work, despite the cancellation of a series of public engagements and a sudden decision to work from home more.

That didn't stop Nezavisimaya Gazeta from speculating that the presidential slipped disk — or whatever it is — necessitates an image makeover from "action man" to "philosopher king."

At least Putin made it back from his flight with the cranes. The Urals city of Serov in June lost its traffic police chief when he jumped in a biplane with some pals and ... disappeared.

Police and emergency workers in the Urals spent a fruitless summer scouring five regions for the missing An-2 and its 13 passengers, but all they found was some empty vodka bottles on the runway.

An amateur radio enthusiastic picked up a mysterious SOS on a device he had made out of a mobile phone, but a search produced nothing. The search was finally called off in November, with rescuers conceding that the Urals had swallowed up the plane as finally as the Bermuda triangle.

While no one knows where the missing plane is, the country did discover "gay propaganda," a beast previously unknown to either science or jurisprudence until morally panicked lawmakers in St. Petersburg banned it in March.

Luckily, eagle-eyed Anatoly Artyukh, leader of a group called the People's Council, was on hand to identify the hitherto purely theoretical work of Josef Goebbels' gay cousins.

So when beverage giant Wimm-Bill-Dann printed a rainbow and a mustachioed cartoon character called the "jolly milkman" on its milk cartons in September, Artyukh went straight to the prosecutors's office with a complaint about this "blatant promotion of vice." One imagines Artyukh felt like he had discovered the Higgs boson.

To date, however, it remains unclear whether investigators agreed that Wimm-Bill-Dann's milk really is gay.

But as 2012 ends, there are at least as many unknown unknowns as known unknowns.

We don't know who or what gave Sergei Lavrov a broken left hand and a busted lip in Turkey earlier this month.

Nor are we ever likely to discover who forced a shutdown of the Druzhba oil pipeline in October by putting condoms in it.

In a fitting end to the year, Napoleon's order to blow up the Kremlin was sold at a French auction — testament to an ambition unfulfilled, an intention never realized.

As Old Father Time wheeled through the seasons, thaw turned to freeze, exhilaration to disappointment, and defiance to resignation.

And that leaves many wondering: Did it happen or not? Either a genie has left a bottle and will not be put back in; or has all hope fizzled and died?

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