

The Russia That Is and the Russia We Wish For

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Okay, so Edward Snowden is out of Sheremetyevo and into Moscow. And some U.S. politicians are unhappy about that.

U.S. President Barack Obama is said to be thinking about cancelling a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in the fall. And Senator John McCain has said it is time to "fundamentally rethink" the U.S.-Russian relationship.

"We need to deal with the Russia that is," McCain is [quoted](#) as saying in the National Journal, "not the Russia we might wish for."

I'm not much of one to hang on the words of this conservative lawmaker from Arizona. But McCain's pithy phrase might soon challenge Winston Churchill's "riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma" as one of the most quotable quotes ever made about Russia.

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I wonder how many people from outside of Russia have ever seen the Russia that is? As for the Russia we might wish for, well, that depends on who is doing the wishing, doesn't it?

But my point here isn't to be snide about anything or anybody.

The fact of the matter is that over the last few days I have been digging through my mother's garage in Southern California. There's a lot of junk there and a lot of it is mine. Like three sections saved out of U.S. newspapers in the first half of 1990 — one from the Los Angeles Times and two from the Seattle Post-Intelligencer.

Early 1990 was still legitimately part of that period we now call Perestroika, the restructuring of the Soviet system before it would collapse approximately 18 months later. And Americans, along with the editors at the newspapers that served them, were fascinated to find out what Russia, or the Soviet Union, was really like.

A headline editor in Seattle even gave this subhead to a huge article heralding the Goodwill Arts Festival in May, a staggering display of Soviet art, performance and culture that accompanied the Goodwill Games that year: "By viewing the country's cultural treasures, festival organizers hope you'll begin to understand its people and traditions."

In other words, the Seattle newspaper was encouraging its readers to see the Soviet Union — Russia — as it was, not as it had been imagined for so many decades.

Frankly, I am fascinated and depressed by the yellowing newspapers I uncovered. They say so much about what we have been through in the last 23 years and most of it isn't encouraging.

A February 1990 report in the Los Angeles Times — "Mother Russia" by Elizabeth Tucker — looks at a host of Russian artists who were beginning to travel back to their homeland after the reopening of borders for the first time in nearly 70 years.

Today, however, we are more apt to read about court dates for the jailed members of the Pussy Riot group; the statement by Russian TV personality Vladimir Pozner that he is abandoning Russia because he doesn't want to share his homeland with "monkeys"; or a declaration by Russian detective novelist Boris Akunin that he will abandon creative writing for an extended period in order to focus on political activism.

In his feature "Soviet Showcase" in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, Kit Boss quotes the scholar Harlow Robinson as saying "The Russians have paid for their culture with blood."

At that time I suspect most of us interpreted a phrase like that as a reference to the past. Now I read it and realize how little things change. And it yanks my thoughts back to the present.

I hope, for instance, that someone good and wise is telling Edward Snowden about the mad paradox, not to say the potential meat grinder, he has walked into. Here he is, arriving in Russia with his admirable and idealistic views of government transparency and free speech at a time when those very aspects of Russian life are, to put it lightly, as confused and damaged as they have been for decades.

Meanwhile, Russia "as it is" continues to be what it always has been — a vital, compelling, challenging and highly unique culture. Quoted in Kit Boss' 1990 feature, the respected art historian John Bowlt declared wryly but forcefully that Russians are as "civilized as anyone else." That's something I would like to put to Senator McCain before he starts drawing quick conclusions about what Russia is.

Those of us who have studied, loved and lived Russian culture — for the record I have lived in Moscow and written about Russian culture for 25 years — are presently struck with a nasty sense of vertigo. Reality, politics, and a few strange quirks of history have conspired to heave us into strange and unpredictable territory. Again.

Once again we are pondering the Russia that is even as we contemplate the Russia we might wish to see.

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