The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

# Taking Back Russia

By Alexei Bayer

September 15, 2013



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One day in the mid-1960s, my aunt Sveta was carrying apples in a knitted bag known as an avoska. It split and the apples scattered on the ground. A stranger helped her gather and carry them to her door. He had an accent and good manners, and my aunt assumed he was an Estonian. He then asked her out.

Sveta was young and attractive. She was divorced, and her son was away at a summer camp. She put on her best dress and went on a date.

He took her to a restaurant, and she soon realized he was no Estonian but a foreigner — and being out with a foreigner was fraught with complications. But the waiters knew him and treated him obsequiously, which reassured her.

After dinner, he announced that he had the use of a car with a driver. He wanted her to show him Moscow, confessing that he had seen only the Kremlin, the Central Committee building and the KGB headquarters. They drove around in a black Volga, ending up near Moscow State University, where they got out to admire the view.

Sveta expected romantic overtures, which she was prepared to repulse since Russian women were not supposed to be easy. Instead, she saw that he was crying.

"I used to dream of Moscow," he said angrily. "When you took Budapest, and the Germans began to run and your tanks mowed them down, it was the happiest day of my life. But then you returned in 1956 and were shooting at my friends, and your tanks were crushing civilians."

Sveta didn't say a word to him, but she was outraged — and so was everyone else she told this story to. They didn't necessarily support the brutal suppression of the Hungarian revolution, but they bridled at the accusation of complicity: "We? What did we have to do with it?"

In the Soviet Union, there was a sharp divide between "us" and "them" (our rulers). "We" had no control over what "they" did and felt no responsibility for their actions. When in 1968 Soviet tanks rolled into Prague, most people also shrugged in resignation. But eight brave men and women came out to Red Square in protest. It was a watershed. For the first time since the 1917 Bolshevik coup, Russians outside the power structure declared that it was their country, too.

The 45th anniversary of that protest on Aug. 25 got a lot of attention, showing that it remains relevant. A re-enactment on Red Square, appropriately enough, ended with the prompt detention of its participants. Russia is still ruled by the nomenklatura and ordinary citizens — including, for that matter, the regime's supporters — have little input into their country's policies, either on the world stage or in their own cities and towns.

But the attitude has changed. Now, a very large number of Russians feel responsible for their country — perhaps even more than Americans do. There is genuine political debate on the Internet. People no longer just come out to protest, as they did in 1968 or even in 1991 and 1993. There is a growing volunteer movement and people collect money and help their countrymen after natural disasters.

The Sept. 8 regional elections showed that the opposition is developing a nascent governing platform. While many analysts bemoaned the low turnout in the Moscow mayoral race, the real takeaway from it was the opposite: how much engagement the voters did show.

Alexei Bayer, a native Muscovite, lives in New York. His detective novel "Murder at the Dacha" was published by Russian Life Books in 2013.

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/09/15/taking-back-russia-a27678