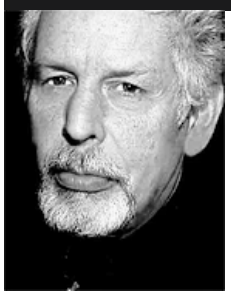
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Made in Russia

By Richard Lourie

October 20, 2013




Richard Lourie

Vacationing recently in the high Mojave desert with family and friends, we all drank a lot of water to stay hydrated. "Look!" said a vivacious French woman, pointing into her glass. "It says 'Made In Russia.'" I peered into the glass like a telescope, remarking: "It also says Ikea. Ikea must have the glasses made in Russia because it is cheaper to do so than in Sweden. Russia is Sweden's Mexico."

I realized that that I had never seen "Made In Russia" on a consumer product. Did this portend a trend or was it just a random incident in globalization?

I was reminded of the novel "A Minor Apocalypse" by Tadeusz Konwicki which I translated from Polish in the early 1980s. One character tells Poles they should be grateful for Soviet communism: "You should pray every day and thank your gods that the Russians have been rendered inert by that idiotic doctrine. ... Imagine a free, democratic Russia with a capitalist economy. In a few years, a Russia of that sort would be producing art of such genius they would have the world on its knees. A Russia like that would truly overtake America in industry."

So why is nobody reading current Russian novels, buying Russian paintings or watching Russian films?

It seems we have gone back a step in time, as if the whole Soviet 20th century barely existed. While nobody is interested in the country's contemporary culture, Russia's 19th-century works have gained popularity. For example, "Eugene Onegin" and "The Nose" are big hits now at the New York Metropolitan Opera. And as for surpassing the U.S., Russia should be happy at just passing Italy.

Why did none of Konwicki's ironic prophesy come true? The country is no longer restricted by an "idiotic doctrine." On the contrary, it so lacks any sense of national identity and purpose that the leadership, too, has had to harken back to the 19th century to concoct a doctrine of nationalism plus Russian Orthodoxy with a dash of Soviet patriotism.

Lack of time cannot be the reason. It has been 22 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In less time than that, Soviet Russia had rebuilt itself from the much-greater devastation of World War I, the 1917 revolution and Civil War.

Perhaps it was because the 1990s gave democracy, liberalism and capitalism a bad name in Russia, and the system snapped back to its default position of central control. But it could not quite snap back all the way. That lead not to "idiotic doctrine" but to "idiotic practice," a system that was neither fish nor fowl. It was not quite democratic, authoritarian, free-market or even state capitalism.

But the Sochi Winter Olympic Games — which cost $50 billion, the most expensive in history —may prove to be a tipping point. If greatly successful, the Olympics might inspire the country with a sort of national pride that could unleash some of the energies Konwicki predicted. Success might even make President Vladimir Putin feel secure enough to loosen some of the screws he has tightened since his re-election in 2012. Or it could simply confirm the correctness of that course.

Yet if the Olympics are seriously marred by terrorism or infrastructure snafus, this would almost like a defeat in war. It would weaken Putin, forcing him to either give ground or dig in his heels.

I remain hopeful about Russia's future, though that probably makes me like the character in the joke which asks: What did the optimist say as he jumped off a skyscraper? So far, so good.

Richard Lourie is the author of "The Autobiography of Joseph Stalin" and "Sakharov:

A Biography."

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/10/20/made-in-russia-a28759