

Set Our Books Free

It's time to make books great again.

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Kirill Zykov / Moskva News Agency

If you asked me about my wishlist for an ideal Moscow of the future, I would suggest, among other things, the following: No weird chemical cocktails splashed on the winter streets, plenty of resistant trees on thoroughfares like Tverskaya and Sadovoye to get rid of their acquired unpleasant-highway look, clean water in the Moscow River allowing you to swim in front of the Luzhniki stadium (that was possible 40 years ago) and... an abundance of book stores of various kind and size.

In truth, the latter may be the most unrealizable feature.

Sadly, bookshops have grown scarce across the universe. I recently read that after the war, Manhattan housed 300 bookstores, while only 30 remain today. Literary meccas like London and Paris have suffered as well.

It's not that Moscow is a special case amid this global trend, but in terms of book presence, the capital genuinely deserves more. Walk up Tverskaya or an adjacent street and discreetly peer into the windows, and you'll see that almost all of these apartments still have shelves filled with books.

In the Soviet Union, books were more than just entertaining reading material. Some titles equaled hard currency; others were an obligatory staple, providing a breath of fresh air and a window to the outside world.

Today, the annual nonfiction book fair in the House of Artists on Krymsky Val still attracts tens of thousands of buyers, and the relatively recent addition of a book festival on Red Square each June is a good way to desacralize the famous open space.

However, the particular status of book trading, publishing and collecting in Russia has dissipated in the last two decades due to social and economic shifts, even though the remnants of this special relationship are still there.

I know from personal experience that people desperately seek to find a proper place for their books and despise the garbage can as a solution.

What options remain? Small libraries in distant regions, prison colonies, hospital wards. Luckily some restaurants (also following a current global trend) accommodate hardcovers in small quantities.

But bookstores are still in need. Bring them back and they'll faithfully serve two important causes. They'll add flavor and humanity to the megapolis and let the presently stagnant volumes circulate like blood in our veins.

Liberate books from the apartments for those who seek this and let them out into the open world. As one old bookseller once told me: "For each title, there is bound to be a client." All that's required is the patience for this dear visitor to arrive, withstanding city center rents and modest returns.

That's where the mayor's office could come in and play the role of a good guy by subsidizing the book trade. Why not? If we can afford to accommodate a hardware store some 200 meters from the Kremlin, it's high time to feed to minds of the Moscovites too.

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

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