

East-West Review

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From the Editor

Слово от редакции

A stunning photographic display, excerpted from Simon Robert's newly published book *Motherland*, is the leading feature of this 2007 spring issue. Although these images hold a timeless quality, they also tell touching tales of lives and landscapes deeply affected by the changes within Russia. It seems appropriate to follow such a vivid display with the results of a survey recently taken among Russians as to how it feels to be Russian nowadays.

This issue comprises a wealth of book reviews – hopefully to suit all tastes – as well as theatre reviews and a fascinating article written by Mikhail Sholokhov's daughter Svetlana, seeking to solve the mystery of her father's last unfinished manuscript.

On another note, I would like to say that I have found compiling, editing and designing the journal a huge – and exciting – challenge these past three years. I could not have achieved this without the assistance of Vera Liber, our intrepid arts editor. Vera and I have come to the conclusion, however, that the time has come to start thinking about handing over this task to a new team, who can perhaps move it on to a new level. We will gladly work on until the end of 2007 but hope to hand over in early 2008. If anyone feels motivated to help out or indeed to take over, please contact me. My details can be found on p.34 of this issue.

Meanwhile I hope you enjoy what is on offer in the next pages and, as always, I give my grateful thanks to all our contributors.



*Russian banya. Ekaterinburg, Urals, May 2005
Sergei Akshentsv and his son Kostya plunge into a freezing lake
having just taken a banya.*

Motherland

Simon Roberts

By courtesy of the author we are able to offer you a taster of his visually fascinating book published on 7 March 2007 by Chris Boot Ltd.

Russia has always fascinated me. As a child, it seemed vast and mysterious. It took up most of the wall map in my geography classroom and was the vital region to capture to win the board game *Risk*. There were the glamorous KGB agents up against James Bond, and the Soviet-bashing propaganda of Cold War films like *Red Dawn* and *Rocky IV*. I marvelled at the photographs of Yeltsin aloft a tank outside the White House in Moscow on the collapse of the Soviet Union, ushering in a new but uncertain era.

In July 2004, I began a year's journey across Russia with my wife, Sarah. Starting in the Russian Far East we travelled through the Siberian provinces, up the Kola peninsula and across to Kaliningrad, before heading down to the Northern Caucasus, the Altai Mountains and along the Volga River. In the course of our travels we covered over 75,000 kilometres and crossed 11 time zones. This was a journey of discovery, a chance to explore every region of Russia and all its seasons. Spending a year there allowed for a sustained engagement with its landscapes and people. Unconstrained by either the time frame or the specific agenda of a photojournalistic assignment, I was able to respond spontaneously.

Motherland is meant as a visual statement about contemporary Russia, 15 years after the fall of the Soviet Union. I wanted to counter some of the photographic representations of Russia that focus on collapse and deterioration – with their emphasis on the consequences of Russia's turbulent past as opposed to the possibilities of its future – without sidestepping the realities of Russian daily life. As my year there progressed, I came to understand that Russians see beauty where an outsider might see only decaying apartment blocks or featureless landscapes. And whilst acknowledging their country's deficiencies, Russians nevertheless believe their native land to be a remarkable and exceptional place. They convey an optimism about it that I soon came to share – an optimism born of more than just patriotism. They see Russia as home, their *rodina*, and they see its landscapes and people as being unique – set apart, spiritual, resilient, even holy. Russians carry with them an innate sense of the history of the motherland and, through it, feel inextricably connected to one another. This nebulous spirituality – defining it is impossible! – this Russianness, is elusive yet all-pervasive.

I hope *Motherland* may be read as a footnote to the current debate about Russian identity during a time of major geopolitical, economic and social change. Ultimately these images are a celebration of Russia, aiming to deepen our understanding of a country and its people. My wish is that the reader finds grounds for optimism and beauty in unexpected places, just as I did.



The Kamchatka peninsula is one of Russia's most isolated regions and is the country's easternmost border. During the Soviet era the region was the centre of Russia's Pacific nuclear submarine fleet due to its proximity to the west coast of America and was closed to individuals without military permission until 1991.



Above: Sturgeon poachers, Kolya Koryakin and Xena Vassif. Kamchatka Peninsula. Far East, October 2004

Every year Kamchatka's rivers host one of the world's largest runs of spawning salmon. For poachers like Kolya Koryakin and Xena Vassif, their red eggs can offer an escape from unemployment and poverty. On the open market in Kamchatka's capital Petropavlovsk caviar sells for up to \$15 a kilo while in Moscow it can sell for five times as much.

Left: Victory day picnic. Yekaterinburg Urals, May 2005

Front cover: Camping with Sasha and Paval. Kamchatka Peninsula. October 2004

Alexander Jukov (Shasha) prepares dinner for his friend Paval Lipatow, during a camping trip. Paval was born in the Altai and moved to Kamchatka where he worked as an engineer for the state oil company for 30 years. He now runs treks through the volcanic mountains of Kamchatka. Alexander works on the fishing trawlers which fish the Pacific Ocean and Bering Sea.



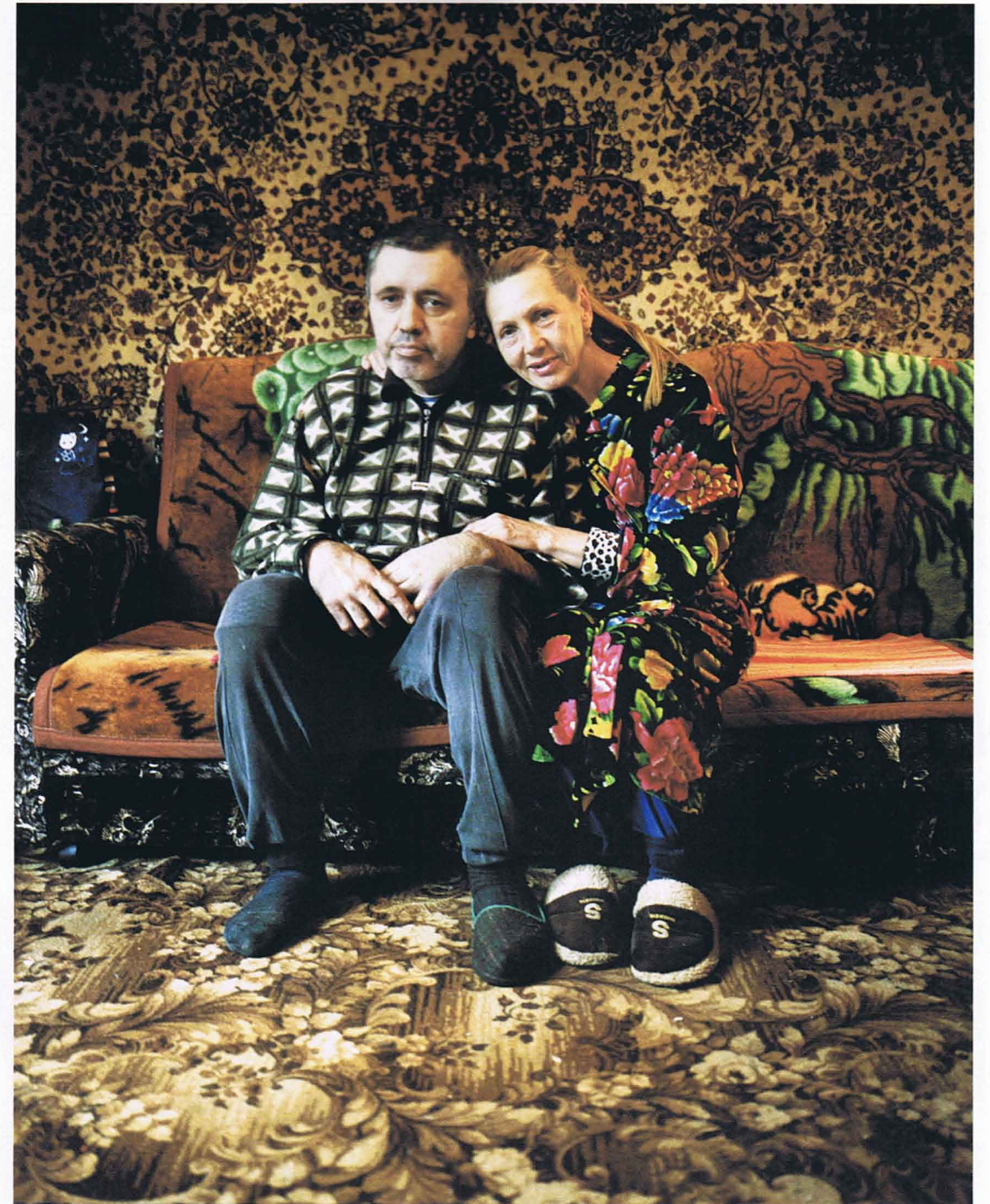
Above: Taxis crossing the frozen Lena River. Yakutsk Far East Russia, November 2004

By November the Lena River has only iced over to a depth of about five metres. The authorities will not flatten an official ice road across the river until the ice is at least ten metres deep. Apart from flying, in winter the only way to get between the cities of Yakutsk and Aldan is to cross the frozen river.



Above: Galina and Sasha. Sakhalin Island. Far East Russia, October 2004

Galina Namakonava and her husband Sasha live in Alexandrovsk-Sakhalinsky. Sasha has been an invalid following an accident at work four years ago, for which he received no compensation. He now must be cared for 24 hours a day by Galina.



Left: Alexandrovsk Port. Sakhalin Island. Far East Russia, October 2004

An abandoned military landing craft and disused fishing trawlers lie in Alexandrovsk-Sakhalinsky Port off the coast of Sakhalin Island. Anton Chekov spent most of his time in the town during his visit to the island in 1890 while gathering material for his book called *Sakhalin Island*. At that time it was a penal colony housing over 10,000 convicts and political exiles and his book painted a bleak picture of this distant outpost of the Tsarist empire.



Above: Port officials. Vladivostok. Far East Russia, October 2004
Vladivostok, meaning Lord of the East, is located fewer than 100 kilometres east of the Chinese border and just across the Sea of Japan from the main Japanese island of Honshu. It is the home port of the Russian navy's Pacific Fleet.



Above: Meat market. Pyatigorsk. Northern Caucasus, April 2005
Pyatigorsk sits at the foot of Mount Mashuk. The city was made famous by Mikhail Lermontov who in an echo of the plot from his novel *A Hero of Our Time* was killed there in a duel in 1841.



Above: Pilgrimage to Gremyachi Kluch. Central region, July 2005
A group of women walk barefoot through the mud to Gremyachi Kluch, a holy spring north of Moscow. The natural spring is believed to have healing properties attracting many people who come to bathe in its waters.



Above: A new development of luxury apartments. Moscow. Central region, July 2005
An elderly man rests on a park bench in central Moscow. In the distance is a new multi-million pound development of luxury apartments.

brass' which cured those bitten by 'fiery serpents' in the *Old Testament* (Numbers 21: 6-9) and referred to by St. John in his verse: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up." (John 3: 14)

Icons have a special language of their own which is complex and needs to be explained to the beholder. After years of looking at icons, gazing at the extraordinarily beautiful iconostases in a host of Russian Orthodox Churches, I have at

last found in *Icons and Saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church* a good guidebook which enables a person to 'read' icons, that is to understand, at least to some degree, the intricate symbolism of these sacred images. ❖

Motherland: Rodina

Simon Roberts

Chris Boot Ltd., London 2007.

Reviewed by Martin Dewhirst

One of the most irritating hangovers from the Soviet period of Russian history is the fairly widespread assumption, not least among hack journalists, that those who criticise the political system based in Moscow are *ipso facto* 'anti-Russian' and do not wish Russia and Russians well. No doubt there are such Russophobes, but the overwhelming majority of people I have met who study seriously some – any – aspect of Russia are patently devoted to that country and its people, however much some of them may dislike whatever regime was or is currently in power. Apart from the Nazis, many of the most critical remarks about Russia have been made by Russians, not least the greatest Russian writers, themselves – the *samokritika* (self-criticism) phenomenon began long before the Communists came to power.

Simon Roberts spent much of his time between August 2004 and July 2005 travelling round the Russian Federation and photographing what he saw. His book contains some 150 of the results, with brief explanatory captions (these latter are the only weak part of the album, as they contain a goodly number of mistransliterations and a sprinkling of careless slips). However, this is no typical coffee-table product, and I'm not sure that it will be of much use to those travel agencies that specialise in persuading prospective tourists to give Russia a try. The unsentimental hard-headedness of

Roberts' approach results, perhaps, from his lack of condescending sympathy for the dreary circumstances in which many of his Russian subjects live and work – apart from the very last photograph, of luxury apartments, living and working conditions still seem to be appalling by Western standards (see, for instance, pages 17, 63, 67, 124 and 125). The absence of sentimentality and glossiness is, I think, the most attractive and unexpected feature of the book – I was expecting at least a few Levitan-like photographs of the peaceful countryside, almost devoid of human beings, but people – all of them real individuals – appear on some four fifths of the photographs and made me regret that I shall almost certainly never have the chance of speaking with even one of them.

I would suggest that everybody who pages through this album should choose her or his three favourite photographs. For me, the most striking and memorable ones are on pages 129, 143 and 181, but no-one else is likely to agree with that choice. The book gains immensely from Rosamund Bartlett's brief introductory article on Russianness and the unique position of Russia and Russian culture in the world. I would add only that it is worth noting that the word *rodina* is still quite often spelt with a capital 'r', as it often was in Soviet times when *Bog* (God) was spelt with a small 'b'. If I were a wealthy sponsor, I would now try to persuade Roberts to produce a similar collection of photographs of the 14 other Republics that used to be part of the USSR. ❖

Lyuba, Port Baikal November 2004 © Simon Roberts

