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An offcut from Simon Roberts's photo essay on Arctic Russia: statue of Lenin, Apatity, north-west Russia. Asked why Lenin was still there, one local said it would cost a lot to remove him, and who would replace him? "We are not ready to put Putin on a pedestal"

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We've been so busy talking about dumbing down that we may have missed an equally striking development: its exact opposite. John Parker reports

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Simon Roberts captures the radiant bleakness of northern Russia

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It's the computer that turned work into play, and all of us into designers. Douglas Coupland, author of "Generation x", gives a personal view of the Apple Mac





The big chill

The Russian winter tends to be romanticised, but it doesn't feel much like a Christmas card when you're actually there. **SIMON ROBERTS** captures its astringent beauty for our photo essay, and talks about it to **ALEXANDRA LENNOX**

ARCTIC RUSSIA IS cold, harsh, strange and vast—it stretches nearly halfway round the world, from Finland to Alaska. If you want to photograph it at its coldest, you have to be quick. “During the winter months”, Simon Roberts says, “it’s perpetual dusk and by 4 o’clock it’s pitch black. I was working in temperatures of minus 25 to minus 40, which left little time to take the pictures as it was difficult to expose my hands for long.”

Roberts, 34, is an award-winning British photographer whose work has been shown everywhere from the pages of *Granta* to the Museum of Modern Art in Shanghai. He spent a year photographing Russia in all its variety for his book “Motherland”, published last year. One of the pictures shown here appeared in the book; the others are being published for the first time.

Most of them were taken in the Arctic north-west, where Roberts was at pains to avoid the obvious. “Artistically, the Russian winter has always been romanticised in snow-covered villages and evergreen woods,” he says. “I wanted to get away >

Left MONCHEGORSK, MURMANSK REGION, NORTH-WEST RUSSIA “The snowy fields around Monchegorsk disguise the fact that it is one of the most polluted towns in Russia,” says Simon Roberts. The church pictured in the foreground was built just a year ago and is surrounded by *dachas* (traditional Russian country homes), a retreat for the rich and poor alike. Since the demise of communism, the church has enjoyed a revival

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> from this idealisation and depict the raw original beauty in the reality of daily life.”

The blue in the pictures, ghostly and enveloping, is not a special effect. “The blueness was a result of the natural light, rather than a colouration or filtering of the film.” It captures the ethereal light and bitter cold of one of the coldest countries in the world. The scenes in north-west Russia were shot over a week in January. “The winter is a time of hardship, survival and extremes; and a great and unexpected beauty.”

Roberts was influenced by Levitan and Shishkin, 19th-century painters of the rural tradition who looked to Russian landscapes for their inspiration, rather than to Paris or Venice as artistic convention dictated at the time. Both painters captured the sombre majesty of the landscape with their melancholy muted colours, qualities that pervade Roberts’s own work.

His pictures evoke a sense of awe and sadness, yet Roberts also found optimism. The people were defiant and hopeful, dignified and proud. “They have a remarkable ability to acknowledge deficiencies yet at the same time believe that their native land is an exceptional place,” he says. “This is a new generation and a new era, one of rapid change.” Yet as with all things Russian, contradictions abound. “Rapid change” conjures up ghastly images of Stalin’s policy of rapid industrialisation—industrial progress at all costs, against all odds; the very policy that many of these towns sprang from; towns built by the hands, and on the bones, of those exiled, deported and imprisoned.

Now, another kind of suffering is coming to the fore: that of nature. Previously a financial drain, these towns and cities are becoming more economically viable as the Arctic is forced open with the rush to extract oil. The photographs show how industry is encroaching on some of the world’s most remote regions, “hinting at the uneasy co-existence between man and nature”.

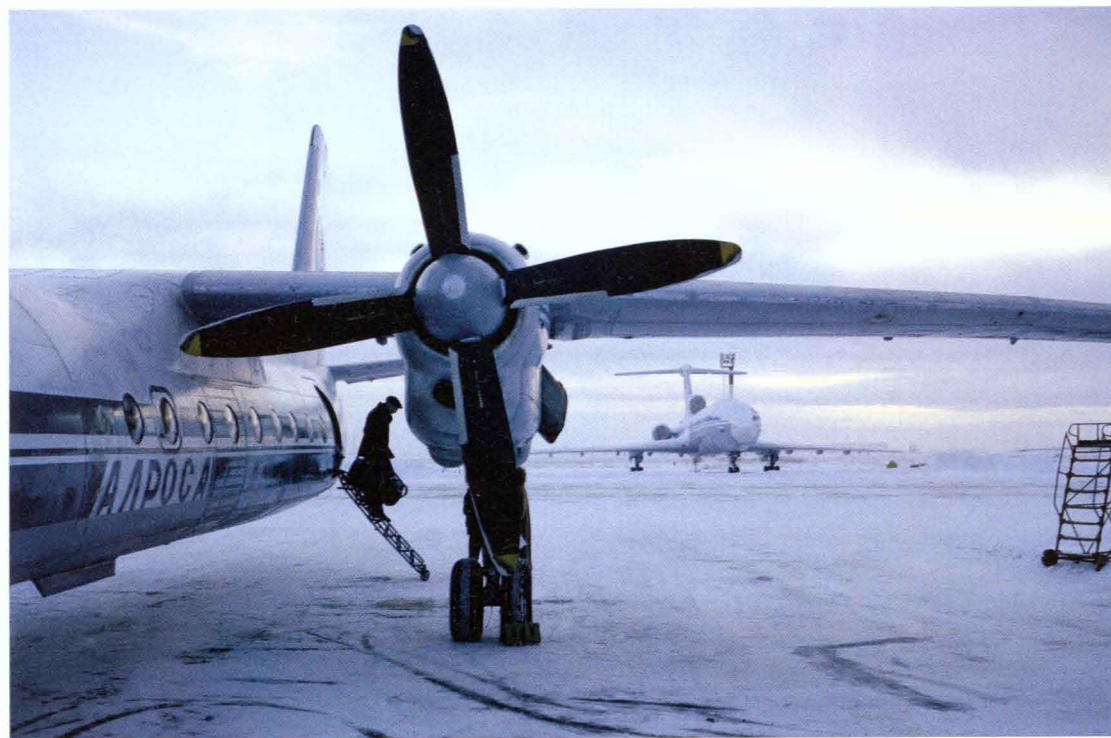
“Winter despite being temporarily and often brutally tamed is able to consume and transform, disguising the man-made world.” Roberts speaks of “man’s ingenuity in the face of nature’s might”: Mother Russia drawing herself up to her full height, showing the vastness and the grandeur of her land. “Russia”, he says, “is a rough diamond. If you can penetrate it, you will find an openness and warmth, but it maintains its rough exterior for protection from the harsh environment in which it resides.” ■

More of Simon Roberts’s work can be seen at www.simoncroberts.com

Right MURMANSK, NORTH-WEST RUSSIA

The bridge crosses a railway yard, used to transport radioactive substances. Roberts says: “The human figures that populate the landscape appear dwarfed by the very things that they have created”





Top and right KOLA BAY, MURMANSK, NORTH-WEST RUSSIA
The abandoned truck lies next to the *Daniel Morgan*, a United States warship torpedoed by the Germans in 1942. The ship sits rusting in the bay. In Murmansk at least 100 nuclear-powered submarines equipped with loaded warheads lie in the harbour. "When taking this shot," Roberts says, "I could hear the eerie clanging of metal on metal"

Above LANDING IN YAKUTSK, NORTH-EAST RUSSIA
This airstrip serves the city of Yakutsk. Before landing, the air stewardess, wrapped in fur, served cold drinks to the passengers







Previous page MURMANSK,
NORTH-WEST RUSSIA

A fire broke out on the edge of the military base on the outskirts of the city. Murmansk harbour is indicated by the cranes in the distance. Voices and machinery, hidden from view, formed the soundtrack to this picture. On creeping forward for a better view, Roberts was arrested and questioned by a 25-year-old FSB official who made a call, on a red dial-faced phone marked "KGB" in Tippex, before searching his charges. This film was only saved by its swift relocation in the photographer's underpants

Left MONCHEGORSK,
NORTH-WEST RUSSIA

A government worker sweeps the snow under a statue of Lenin which stands in front of the city's council building. If Lenin knew his electrification programme was being used to light blow-up Father Christmases, he would turn in his display case