



In the Name of Humanity

by Cathy Young

If the Clinton administration is shaping up to look like soap opera, what genre can adequately describe the politics of post-Communist Russia? Theater of the absurd, perhaps. The end of 1992 was marked by more turmoil, as the Yegor Gaidar government crumbled and career Soviet apparatchik Viktor Chernomyrdin—whose name, for the linguistically minded, is of Ukrainian extraction and means, roughly, “black-face”—took over. Price controls on food staples were reinstated and then almost immediately rolled back. Deputies in the Supreme Soviet scuffled in front of TV cameras at the December Congress. In January, two democratic members of parliament, Lev Ponomarev and Pyotr Filipov, were roughed up by protesters from “Working Moscow” (a hard-core Communist group headed by Viktor Anpilov, in his previous life a Soviet TV correspondent in Nicaragua), who were picketing the White House. A few days later, the evening news reported that a certain deputy had used “language we cannot repeat in our program” in a speech at the Supreme Soviet. A friend from Moscow writes in disgust, “The Supreme Soviet is starting to look like a den of criminals. They fight, they swear—pretty soon they’ll start attending the sessions armed with bike chains and knives.”

Back in the States, we have the invaluable Stephen F. Cohen of Princeton University, his face fixed in a worried frown, to explain that the United States is wrong to stake its Russian policy on one man—Boris Yeltsin—to the exclusion of other democratic forces. (He was known to have a different opinion when the one

man was Mikhail Gorbachev.) Cohen points to Yeltsin’s falling popularity and urges Americans to be more respectful of the democratically elected albeit imperfect Russian parliament and its chairman (speaker) Ruslan Khasbulatov, the former Yeltsin sidekick who has emerged as a leading opponent of “free-market extremism.” In his December 1 speech to the Congress, published as a booklet under the modest title *In the Name of Humanity*, Khasbulatov—who has a Ph.D. in economics from Moscow State University and used to be the dean of the international economic relations department of the Plekhanov Economics Institute in Moscow—gives his colleagues a little lecture on economic theory and history:

The so-called neoclassical liberal model . . . is based on the complete rejection of state ownership and, accordingly, the absolutization of private ownership, which presupposes a drastic reduction of the social functions of the state. The starkest example of such a model is the economic policy of the United States of the post-Roosevelt period.

Having thus dispelled in one stroke the notion of the superiority of the Soviet educational system, Khasbulatov goes on to denounce “the attempts to Americanize our economy” and advocate a “socially oriented market economy” of the Scandinavian, Israeli, or Canadian type. So Stephen Cohen’s affection for the man is hardly a mystery.

As often happens, however, Khasbulatov’s dislike of unbridled capitalism appears far more theoretical than personal: in addition to having moved into Leonid Brezhnev’s old quarters, he is said to be extensively involved in real-

estate speculation through his cousin, a co-owner of the Style-Bank real-estate firm. The weekly *Stolitsa* also reports that the speaker may have had a hand in a bank fraud operation that cost the Russian Central Bank between 35 and 116 billion rubles. The operation, uncovered in the spring of 1992, consisted of fictitious firms getting cash from the Moscow branch of the Central Bank by using fake money orders from Chechen banks (Khasbulatov is from Checheno-Ingushetia) and dissolving before the deception could be found out. Curiously, while it usually takes weeks to cash a money order in Russia, these were cashed in a few days. The director of the Moscow branch of the Central Bank, Georgi Shor, happens to be the other co-owner of Style-Bank.

Perhaps Cohen’s sympathies might be cooled by strong evidence of far more disturbing misconduct. In an interview with *Moscow News*, Galina Starovoštova, a widely admired democratic political leader who served as Yeltsin’s adviser on ethnic affairs until she was fired last November, denounces the “masculinism” of Russian politics, and, *inter alia*, has this to say: “I understand how tough it is for female deputies to work in a parliament whose speaker constantly permits himself crude remarks that would have cost him his job in any civilized society.”

And what about Cohen’s contention that the Russian parliament (elected in 1990 under an effective one-party system) represents the Russian people? Actually, surveys show that while Yeltsin’s popularity is not what it used to be, the parliament and its leader are even less popular. In a December 13 poll of 2,257 Muscovites conducted by the All-Russian Center for Public

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Opinion Research, 28 percent wanted Yeltsin to resign, while 60 percent wanted him to stay in office, with the numbers almost reversed on the question of Khasbulatov's resignation: 57 percent for, 25 percent opposed. (This should not be read as an unambiguous statement of support for reform. Aleksandr Rutskoi, Yeltsin's "conservative" veep, came out on top as well: only 21 percent favored his resignation while 55 percent opposed it.) Thirty percent thought that a victory for the Yeltsin side would be the best way to resolve Russia's political crisis; a mere six percent wanted the Khasbulatov people to win; 34 percent favored a compromise between the two sides; and "a pox on both your houses" was the attitude of 22 percent.

The Center conducted a far more extensive nationwide end-of-the-year survey, whose results were published in the January 3 issue of *Moscow News*. Some of the data were compared to those of previous years, showing that on some counts, the popular mood may actually have improved slightly since 1990. Thus, 14 percent of respondents in 1992, versus 11 percent in 1990, said that they felt more hopeful than they had a year ago. Slightly fewer people (42 vs. 44 percent) said they felt more "tired and indifferent," and the number of those who reported feeling more "embittered and aggressive" dropped from 48 to 40 percent. Most of these changes are well within the margin of error, but some sort of wobbly trend does seem to emerge. On the other hand, the number of those feeling more "scared" than the previous year went up from 15 to 22 percent; "bewilderment" was up two points (from 18 to 20), and the number of those who felt more "pride in their country" dropped from 3 to 2 percent.

The news for Yeltsin is mixed: while his popularity rating for December was only 37 percent (up 10 percent from October), he still emerged as the most popular public figure (Khasbulatov ran a distant sixth). Gaidar ranked second, Rutskoi third, Kazakhstan president Nursultan Nazarbaev fourth, and Veronica Castro fifth. No relation to Fidel, Veronica is the star of the interminable Mexican soap "The Rich Also Weep," which had millions of Russians

glued to their television screens and thousands of intellectuals wringing their hands over the decline of public taste. When survey respondents were asked to name the most important events of the year, 19 percent mentioned the show (while only 11 percent conferred a similar importance on the Communist Party trial). These numbers, concludes sociologist Yuri Levada, are another sign of the "normalization" of society, a shift in focus away from politics and toward private life.

Other poll numbers paint a picture more hopeful than recent reports about the rise of pro-dictatorship sentiment. According to Levada, the numbers of those favoring dictatorship (22 percent) and those unambiguously opposed (53 percent) have remained fairly stable over the past two years. Meanwhile, in a poll last November, 66 percent of Russians said that their country could regain superpower status by pursuing faster economic reform, and only six percent said that an armed forces buildup was the way to go.

In the December '92 survey, people

were asked which recent developments they found most distressing. Sixty-seven percent named inflation and the drop in living standards (down, curiously, from 75 percent at the end of '91—is that evidence of slightly higher optimism, or of resignation?); 30 percent, "the disintegration of economic links" (down from 40); 28 percent, "the collapse of the USSR and the weakening of ties between CIS countries" (down from 38); and 26 percent, "the country's loss of superpower status" (down from 30). The ban on the Communist party, which distressed a mere 6 percent of Russians at the end of 1991, seemed even less upsetting a year later—it was mentioned by two percent of the respondents. Just 10 percent named "growing economic dependency on the West."

And what of the Russians' famed egalitarian passions? Well, only 19 percent put the "growing gap between rich and poor" on the list of their top peeves (down from 26 percent in December '91). In the Clinton era, the number of Americans bothered by such things is no doubt higher. □

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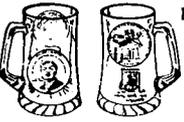
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The Sprucewood Inn

by Dave Shiflett

At a remote crossroads in the Pike National Forest, forty-five miles southwest of Denver, stands the Sprucewood Inn, a small tavern in the log-cabin style, the sort of establishment the muscatel-lit Jack Kerouac might have considered the ideal place to die.

Unfortunately for poor Jack, he was doomed to expire in the tropical sweat of St. Petersburg, Florida, after a sizable guzzling of Scotch. Being of a more healthy bent, others of us come to this mountain spa beneath the evergreens to be revived, often after a long day of pulling rainbows from the nearby South Platte River, where a recent electronic survey found upwards of 1,400 trout per 1,000 feet, some of which are large enough to take the hand off an infant.

We fishers feel quite strongly about this drinking facility. Like all blue-ribbon bars, the Sprucewood benefits greatly from its location, which must be considered in the widest context to be fully appreciated. From the front door it is 1,600 miles to the Atlantic Ocean, a trip that includes long stretches of geographic white noise—most notably Kansas—and a drop of 7,500 vertical feet. Some 1,100 miles to the West, across the deserts and the smoldering ruins of Los Angeles, lies the cold Pacific. Thinking of all that land between the sea and thee is enough to work up a big thirst in all but the most incorrigible imam.

On a typical midcontinent Saturday, hordes of anglers pass the Sprucewood en route to the river. The smart ones forgo that early morning draft for many reasons, among them Nighthawk Hill, which lies between the inn and the bounteous South Platte. Nighthawk includes a stretch with a 15 percent grade (suitable

for the Giant Slalom) and no guard rails: a falling car might end its journey on the hungry boulders below, which seldom release their catch.

But after a day on the river, as the sun sinks toward Tokyo, the neon Coors sign in the front window acts like a powerful magnet on the front bumper of an angler's car, even when plans were to go straight home. For unknown reasons, we slam on the brakes at the last moment, skidding to a loud halt in the mountain stillness, sometimes only feet from the Sprucewood's front door.

It's not a big place: five booths, nine bar stools, and sparse decorations, the most notable being a couple of Polaroids of a treed mountain lion and a shotgunned turkey. The menu is also limited. Beers (bottled, three brands) go for \$1.75, and a limited selection of spirits, including good Tennessee whiskey, is also available. Those planning to dine at the Sprucewood will note that the chef serves no french fries. At last count, eight signs stated as much, so it's safe to assume he means it.

But these limitations hardly matter, since the real point of going there is to swap fishing stories. By mutual agreement, the truth is taken out early on and locked in the trunk. Soon even fingerlings undergo huge growth spurts, some reaching sizes so big they straighten hooks, snap rods, and bore escape tunnels through solid rock. One fellow told of watching a bald eagle being pulled under by a jumbo German brown, the raptor apparently giving off a very loud shriek just before disappearing in a bloody foam.

It's worth mentioning that on many days the Sprucewood beer may not be a fisher's first. When he entered the river, it's possible that in the front of his waders were stashed two Olympias (priced a recent weekend at \$10.45 for

three 12-packs), while in his vest were stashed other secret weapons (also purchased at a discount), including flies tied by Guatemalan prisoners of state.

Thus lubed, even the most reserved of us often feel obliged to tell our own tales, which may have started when an afternoon cloud passed between us and the sun, at which moment a big rainbow, 11 years old by the looks of him, made a mistake. The bugger struck hard, we explain, tearing down the river, but we held on tight, fighting him, following him, finally netting him. Slowly, we slipped him into the back of the fishing vest, continuing our casting as the sun set and he died upon our back.

"How big was he?" your sipping partner might ask.

"What'd I say a second ago?"

"Twenty inches."

"Make that twenty-two point five, and fat as Oprah's thigh."

The catch-and-release purists at the next table are miffed that you are taking the big boy home, and in fact it was not altogether pleasant feeling him in his death throes, the poet in you noting that his fins, scratching the inside of your vest, sounded like an angel's wings brushing the inside of a coffin. But what the heck—it's only a fish, not your grandmother. Let's not be saps about it.

The rich have their clubs, from which they depart with revived intellects and spirits, and we fishers have our Sprucewoods, where we warm ourselves in the age-old glow that comes from capturing fellow creatures for the purpose of eating them. That glow stays with us as we roll toward our high-plains cities, their lights twinkling below us as we descend the mountain. On the back patio, the rainbow roasts on the grill, Pisces blazes above, and heaven settles in for the evening. And tomorrow? Tomorrow, of course, we go after the bugger's sister. □

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