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Behind Closed Doors and Underground

By Elena Agarkova

MOSCOW—All Russians have an internal passport. However, you cannot travel abroad with it. Before you cross the borders of this country, you have to apply for a special “trans-border passport.” Back in the old days it was impossible to get one unless your trip was specifically authorized by your organization, be it a university, a factory, or a government ministry. The person traveling — or, to be precise, hoping to travel, since the trip was never a sure thing until you actually crossed the border of the Soviet Union — lived in fear of being turned

or not to approve... A lot of arbitrary power was exercised in those days.

After the fall of the Soviet Union the new government promised its citizens that their regular passports would be enough for traveling abroad. Seventeen years later Russians still have to apply for a foreign travel passport when they want to go anyplace that requires a visa from Russian nationals.

I'm a Russian citizen still. It so happened that

my foreign travel passport expired earlier this year, and since it takes the Russian Consulate in New York more than two months to process passport applications, and I wasn't sure of the exact date of my departure, I chose another option. I let my passport expire and received a piece of paper from the Consulate attesting to the fact that I was indeed a Russian citizen and could enter the country. That piece of paper also stated that I have to “surrender it to the appropriate official orga-



People waiting in line in front of the militia, before the passport office opens.

nization in three business days since arrival into the country.” I had nothing against surrendering my passport upon arrival, but I got into Moscow late on Monday night, at 9 p.m., when it was obviously too late to go to the *militia* (Russian police) office.

back for any reason, having been deemed untrustworthy of upholding the country's reputation and/or remaining loyal to the Party in the midst of lurid yet potentially irresistible bourgeois temptations. Your “candidacy” was vetted on different levels. People who knew you could submit comments or write anonymous letters about you (sometimes ruining your reputation and career forever). During Party meetings communist functionaries would speak for or against you going abroad. Would you represent the country in the proper light or would you fall prey to the lights of Broadway? Ah, to approve

The next day I woke up at two in the afternoon (because of flight delays and missed connections I had not slept for more than two days), and did not feel ready to face the Russian bureaucracy. So it came down to Wednesday, which, surprisingly, also turned out to be the

day when my local militia office was holding 'passport days.' All Russians are assigned to a specific militia district, usually that of where they were born, until they officially secure a relocation somewhere else. According to the handwritten schedule at the office, they only accepted applications for foreign passports on Wednesdays and gave them out on Saturdays and Mondays. The official Moscow Militia website failed to mention any such peculiarities in local branches.

Alas, my luck ran out there. First, in addition to the required documents listed on the official Militia site, the local policemen scribbled in a few other items on the list hanging on the wall, such as a "paper folder" and an "envelope" (presumably to create a file for our papers). I did not possess such items on my person. To make matters worse, I was number 29 in line, at 11 a.m. The office opened an hour earlier; the lucky number one showed up at five in the morning, starting a handwritten list of names that people in line passed around, keeping track of new additions. These procedures reminded me of my childhood, spent in lines governed by similar rules.

The office was processing an average of four people an hour. This wouldn't be so bad on a regular day, except this Wednesday was the last day before the four-day long Russia Day holidays, and all of the militia was going home at two in the afternoon to begin celebrating. I didn't stand a chance even with a paper folder and an envelope in my hands.

Instead of waiting in the cramped hallway, I went around the corner, following a sign advertising consultations for passport applicants. I did not do so because I don't have faith in my own abilities (as an American-trained lawyer or a common-sense-wielding human being) to fill out the application. I did so because I believe, after having grown up in the Soviet Union, that these people are all "connected," that most likely the local militia office supplies this guy with the proper forms and paperwork, tells him how to fill them out, accepts those forms without too much questioning, and takes a cut.

Could I be wrong? Sure, potentially, yes. The chances of me being wrong? Quite slim, I thought. It seemed to be a smooth operation. There were no dissatisfied customers lurking around. I went for it. Two hours later I emerged with a printout of the application form that, upon further examination, stated that I was applying for a foreign travel passport for the first time, even though the guy filling out the form had my original foreign travel passport in front of him for at least half an hour (and had copied its number into a different part of the application). I came back to correct my application, commiserating with two other women about the inanity of the whole process. One of them described how excruciatingly difficult it is to take a biometric photo (required for the foreign travel passports) of newborns:



A militia patrol strolling along the Red Square.

"They can't even focus on something right in front of them. How are they going to look at the camera on demand? The girl taking the picture spent at least 40 minutes trying to catch my baby at that exact moment!" Our collective conclusion was that all of these additional documents were being foisted upon the hapless population so that the militia and their relatives running consultation desks could make more money.

The lines and long waiting periods for foreign travel passports (I've read accounts of people waiting for up to half a year to receive their passport) are also a reflection of the new wealth and ability of Russians to go abroad. As I mentioned earlier, when I was growing up, you couldn't just buy a ticket to Turkey or Thailand; now these countries are major tourist destinations for Russians, and a recent front-page article in the New York Times described the efforts of young Turks to learn Russian, so that they can serve their clientele better.

There are ways of getting your passport faster. If you are in a real hurry — say, you're a businessman who absolutely needs to leave for China in a week — there are companies offering help in getting your passport in five, sometimes even three, days. The quicker you need it, the more it will cost, of course. When I sat in line, I saw people cut in and go straight into the passport office; sometimes people who didn't even go through our hallway came out of the office with documents in hand. There's always a back door and someone who you can ask, "How can I speed up the process?" But I was bent on doing it the proper way.

It was too late to go back to the militia office, so I decided to wait until Monday, when they re-opened. Instead I walked around the city center. In anticipation of the Russia Day holidays Moscow emptied out. There were almost no cars on the usually packed streets. On a regular day congestion is terrible and the parking situation is so bad that

drivers leave cars on the sidewalks as a matter of course. During these holidays even the Moscow Metro, a spectacular engineering feat responsible for transporting millions of people each day, was half empty.

I am a big fan of the Moscow Metro. It's an elaborate snowflake of tunnels and marble stations that spreads underneath the city. The trains — some new, some still bearing "Made in the USSR" stamp — are clean (with the exception of an occasional empty beer bottle or soda can), bright, free of graffiti. They come every 2 to 3 minutes — it's a smooth operation. The Metro closes from 1 a.m. until 5:30 a.m., for repairs. During peak hours you cannot escape the human torrent moving through the tunnels that connect neighboring stations. The only time I've felt claustrophobic was here, hundreds of meters underground, as a river of fellow commuters carried me along to their destination, without a chance of stepping out of the common flow.

The first Metro line opened in May of 1935. Some of the older stations built in the earlier days are so deep underground that during WWII, in addition to performing their usual functions, they served as bomb shelters. (They were built deep for this purpose.) Muscovites spent not only days, but also slept underground during German air raids over the city. You can only access most stations via long escalators that move surprisingly fast for someone who spent a long time in a culture of personal injury lawsuits.¹

The Russian militia patrol the Metro, standing along marble walls in groups of three or four. During the month of July Muscovites celebrated Fleet Day, Air Force Day, and Paratrooper Day; on all of these holidays rowdy, happy groups of young guys in various articles of army-navy clothing tumbled through the Metro, chanting patriotic slogans, singing, being merry. The militia boys (most of them are very young) looked on. It seems their main role is to stop "foreign-looking" passengers and ask for their documents. Russian media sometimes reports complaints by foreign students or immigrants of Asian descent of frequent document checks by the police. Anyone who looks "Caucasian" — which in Russian literally refers to the Caucasus Mountains area (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and southwest Russia, including Chechnya) — is automatically suspect. This situation reminds me of stories my black friends in law school told of Washington D.C. police stopping them every few minutes when they walked down the street during their nights out, or of Sikhs being attacked at New Jersey gas stations after September 11, because they were wearing turbans.

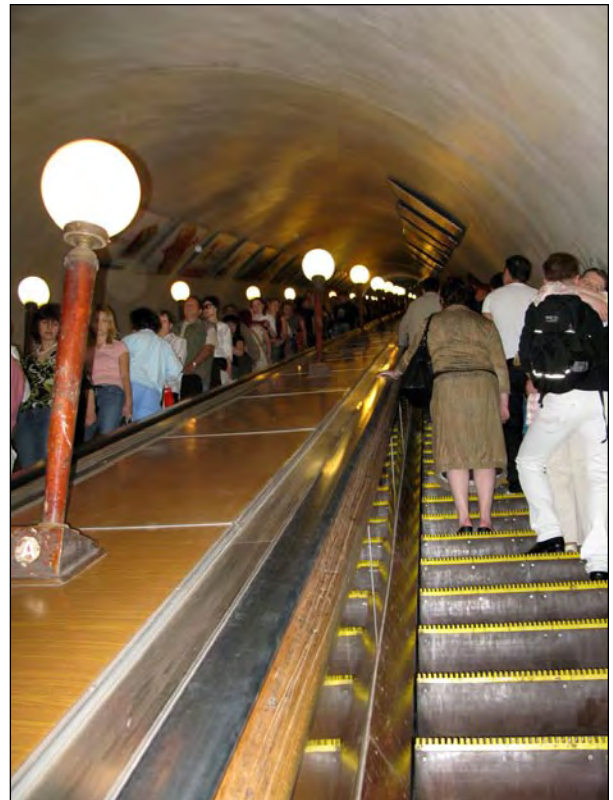
The most striking thing about the Moscow Metro is its

design. Many stations are the work of famous architects; many feature works of art depicting productive, healthy, satisfied members of a socialist society.

Most stations have walls and floors of different types of marble; sculptures and busts of famous leaders and writers stand next to border guards and peasants. Massive chandeliers hang from high ceilings, and wall sconces decorate the tunnels and escalators.

A Russian writer friend of mine refers to the Metro stations as "totalitarian temples." As he explained his point of view to me, socialist builders of the underground took pagan and Christian places of worship as architectural models, replacing ancient gods with idols, to be worshipped by thousands on their way to work and as they return home, having contributed to construction of the communist society.

My friend may be right. This theory extends to other examples of socialist architecture. If you take a look at Lenin's Mausoleum, a pyramid-like structure of marble, and you didn't know that the body that rests inside belonged to an atheist, you might think you were looking at the burial place of a god. Lines of worshippers who patiently wait outside, in all kinds of weather, for a chance to walk in complete



Hundreds of meters underground

1 Supposedly, there is more to the Moscow underground than what the Metro map shows. The Russian internet is full of stories about Metro-2, a secret network of tunnels that used to carry Stalin to his dacha from the Kremlin, and would allow high-ranking officials to safely and quickly get out of the city. Moscow "diggers," people who like to spend their free time getting dirty in caves, sewage pipes, and other underground spaces, talk about Metro-2 a lot. I called the (self-proclaimed) leader of the diggers to ask him some questions about his hobby (I've seen this man on TV and he seems to like the attention of journalists), but he said that he is busy preparing for "a secret expedition," that Metro-2 is a classified state secret ("object D-6," whatever that means), and that he will think about talking to me for a day and give me a call back. I haven't heard from him since.



Mosaics in one of the Metro stations glorify the common people — factory workers, students, relaxing peasants, youngsters chatting with a war veteran.

silence by the bullet-proof sarcophagus and glance at the mummified body behind the glass, would strengthen your suspicions that you are witnessing a religious ritual. So would sculptures of Lenin that still remain standing around Moscow, pointing the way to the bright future, and quotes from his writings that decorate monuments and building walls.

The ritualistic meaning of socialist architecture makes sense when one considers the destruction of religion and spirituality that took place in the USSR after the October 1917 revolution, when the Bolsheviks overthrew the multi-party Provisional Government (which governed the country after the Russian monarchy fell, in spring of 1917) by violent force and declared a “dictatorship of the prole-

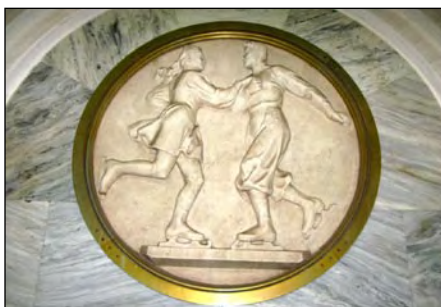
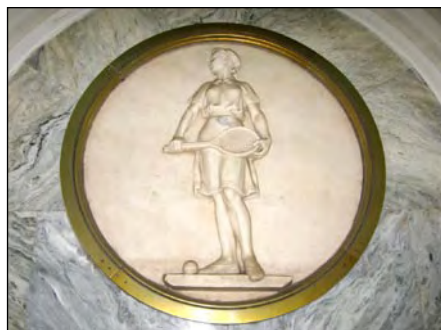
tariat.” After the coup, the Bolsheviks began a systematic destruction of churches and other places of worship.

“Religion is the opium of the people,” wrote Marx, and in the 1920s and 1930s Communist commissars took to eagerly destroying church buildings, looting church property, melting gold crosses and silver utensils into coins for the new state. These campaigns, often ending in violence, happened all across Russia. From their first days in power, the Bolsheviks shot or sent to labor camps priests of all denominations. The Party created an entire propaganda machine for fighting religion. For example, in 1922 the USSR began publishing a newspaper “Godless” (or “Heathen”); several years later friends and readers of this publication formed a “Union of the Militant Godless.” This society functioned on funds from the Soviet government as well as money realized from the closure of churches and sales of church property. In addition to anti-religious proselytizing and looting, its members formed propaganda “brigades” which often entered churches during Mass, dancing and singing Communist songs. Sometimes churchgoers beat up these entertainers, but the consequences were dire.

The anti-religious campaign especially targeted youth. Upon becoming members of Komsomol, a Communist youth organization, young men and women had to take an oath that they would remain atheists for the rest of their life.

In replacing the moral void previously filled by religion, communism offered its own system of beliefs and figures of worship. Instead of a traditional icon in the top corner of the room, the new regime set up “Red Corners” in community houses, schools, and workplaces. Red Corners displayed portraits of Lenin. Children often put flowers there; they also wrote poems and letters dedicated to the

Another example of socialist art depicting common pursuits of the regular people — here, youth sports on the walls of the Metro.



leader, and even sent gifts to him. Every Young Pioneer (a boy scout-type of Communist organization for kids) wore a red kerchief and a pin with young Lenin's angelic face on it to school every day. We referred to him as "grandpa Lenin," and swore to be as honest and industrious as him.

Eventually most people (except for some old ladies who had nothing to fear anymore) stopped going to church on a regular basis, but that was not enough. The Party acknowledged that there still remained certain "reactionary" elements, who masqueraded as godless communists but continued to believe in secret. With Andropov becoming the head of KGB in the late 1960s, his agents began to infiltrate the Russian Orthodox priesthood — or remnants thereof (as far as I know, this was not done with other religions that existed in the USSR, such as Islam, Judaism, or Buddhism). KGB personnel attended seminaries, became priests, went to religious conventions and influenced church politics.

My parents went to one of Moscow universities in the early 1970s. They were not religious then. Atheism was a core subject in all Soviet academia, and you had to pass a final exam in atheism to graduate from a university. I've always remembered a story my mother told me about a girl in her

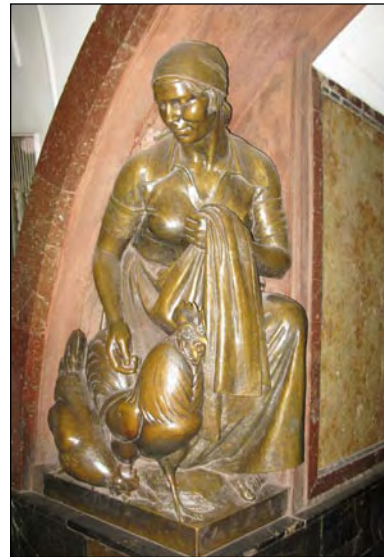
or geologists sent by the State to work on one of the strategically important construction or research projects somewhere in the depths of Siberia.

Any sign of my baptism at my parents' work places would have cost them their jobs. While I remember going to church as a kid a few times, it was always with my grandmother, never with anyone else.

By the 1970s, collaboration between the Russian Orthodox Church and the KGB was commonplace. After Khrushchev's "thaw," the KGB, in addition to infiltrating the church, routinely forced priests to inform on each other and their churchgoers. Most of those "tapped" to inform didn't have a choice — or they say they didn't. A refrain that comes up often in the modern confessions of these unwilling informants is that if they refused, someone worse would have taken their place.

Is it a surprising fact that Putin, a former KGB officer, had a Russian Orthodox priest who acted as Putin's spiritual advisor during his years as president?

Today many people of my generation and younger



Metro statues of new heroes — or perhaps very old gods? — a warrior, mother with child, and a peasant woman with, of all things, a chicken.

class who was religious, and didn't think it was right for her to take the atheism exam. She went to a Russian Orthodox priest for advice. (In a Russian Orthodox Church there is no confession booth; everything happens in the open, with others looking on, and you are face-to-face with the priest.) The university expelled the girl a couple of weeks later.

Soon after, I was born, and my grandmother baptized me in secret. She took me to a church on the other side of Moscow, and gave a bribe to the woman in charge of the church registry, who was supposed to record my last name. My grandmother also told the woman that my parents could not come themselves (and she didn't have their passports — another requirement for a baptism) because they were working "up North." This implied that they were engineers

openly wear crosses around their necks. Russian Christmas and Easter Masses are especially popular, with churches packed so tight that one cannot move — a bad fire hazard given the Russian Orthodox custom of holding lighted candles during certain parts of the Mass. It's not uncommon for churchgoers to singe the hair of the women standing in front of them. Recently Moscow got a major Russian Orthodox symbol back, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. The original was finished in 1883, after 44 years of construction. My grandmother told me that back then people from all over Russia sent eggs to Moscow for the project. Using an ancient recipe, the builders mixed cement with the eggs to make a stronger foundation.

Stalin ordered the Cathedral to be blown up in 1931. For



More than 800 churches existed in Moscow in 1917. By 1991, less than 200 functioned. The Soviet regime destroyed at least half, and closed the remainder.

a couple of years he entertained plans of building a grandiose palace in its place; he abandoned this idea eventually, most likely because of a lack of funds. Instead the biggest outdoor swimming pool appeared where the Cathedral stood. In the early 1990s my friends who went there to exercise described high-class prostitutes who lounged around the pool in high heels.

But the powers-that-be decided to bring the Cathedral back. The Russian Orthodox Church created a charity fund for the reconstruction, and thousands of people contributed money to the project. The media reported instances of blatant extortion by overly zealous local bureaucrats, who sent letters to businesses within their jurisdiction asking businessmen to contribute a certain sum to the Cathedral's reconstruction (and providing the bank account of the Cathedral's charity fund). The businesses that did not take part in the charity received a follow-up letter, informing them that they had an outstanding debt (of a certain sum suggested previously), to be paid immediately.

The new Cathedral took 40 years less to build than the original; started in 1995, it was completed in 1998. Today it's a sprawling complex that includes an underground garage for 300 cars and several dining halls. If you so desire and can afford it, you can toast to a successful business deal under the stern images of Russian saints. All of the Cathedral's spaces are available for rent.

The building is too new for my liking; I think it suffers from the same problem as Ivy League colleges back in the day, which supposedly washed their brand new stone walls with acid to give them a patina of old-age respectability associated with ancient British institutions.

One evening in July I fought through the city's horrendous evening traffic and a torrential downpour to a couple of boats docked behind the Cathedral on the Moscow River.

I was going on a cruise for Columbia-Harvard-Yale alumni working in Moscow. The boats left the dock once the rain subsided and some stranded invitees made it aboard. We exchanged business cards and ran through our resumes, hovering above *blini* with different kinds of stuffing (very good) and *pirozhki*, little baked pies (also delicious). The crowd consisted of foreigners doing business in Russia, Russians working in foreign or big Russian companies, and their American-Dutch-English significant others. I realized at some point that I shared a very similar biography with most of the Russians in attendance (to be precise, some of them were not ethnic Russians but were native Russian speakers). Born and raised in the USSR until a certain age, we somehow ended up in the US or Europe as children or teenagers, got our bachelor or masters degrees there, and came back to Russia in the past few years, because — and this is what everyone said when I asked them “why?” — there are more opportunities here. More jobs in the finance sector, more opportunities, more money for people with their set of skills.

These men and women are Russia's growing (upper) middle class. They share similar experiences, of escaping a totalitarian system, adjusting to capitalism, and returning to the place that some of their parents didn't want to call home. They can speak English with a Louisiana drawl, but their childhood memories are of the Soviet Union. But their political opinions, whatever those may be, didn't seem to get in the way of their main goal — making the best, financially, of their situation.

I received a couple of job offers during the cruise, which I proudly turned down, describing an ICWA fellowship in return. I also talked about environmental compliance with an American lawyer who worked as counsel for Russia's



A girl lighting a candle in a small church in the center of Moscow.

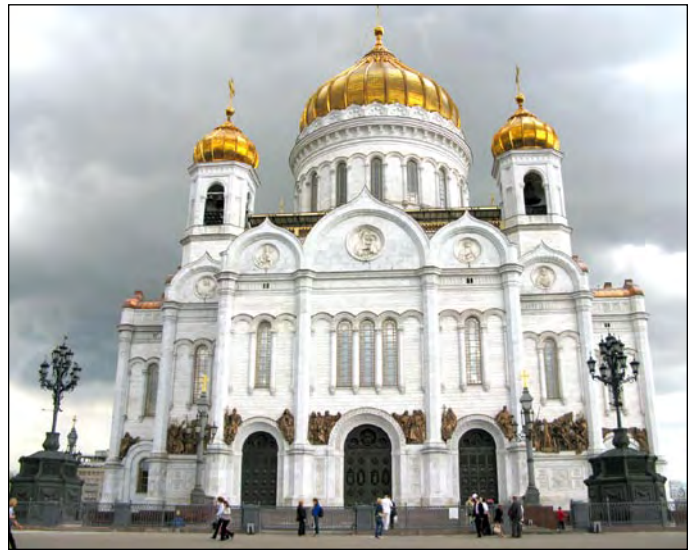
biggest aluminum producer. He told me that Russia's biggest problem was not the lack of good environmental laws, but their unrealistic demands, corruption, and lack of any meaningful enforcement. In this he echoed my grandmother, who, after watching the Russian Duma report the results of their last session, commented: "Who cares if they passed all these laws? Who's going to do anything? The drunks who stand by our supermarket say that they'll continue drinking in public as they always did, and the police don't care!"

There are plenty of laws in Russia, and enough contradictions to allow what another American lawyer friend of mine calls the "dictatorship of the law." He told me, "At any time you are guilty of something in this country." So the government is free to engage in selective prosecution. My friend was talking about cases like Khodorkovsky's, and Sakhalin-2, an oil-drilling project in the Russian Far East where the Russian government recently used environmental violations by Western companies to force them to sell their stake in the project. Selective prosecution is a mighty tool that can be applied with various degrees of pressure to achieve the desired result.

Last month two government officials from a ministry that oversees the media showed up in the offices of *The eXile*, a raunchy, irreverent, and funny magazine run by American journalists in Moscow. The officials asked to see some of the issues of the magazine, and seemed particularly interested in any writings by Limonov, a somewhat odious figure in the Russian opposition, the head of the National Bolshevik party (small following) who is nonetheless a thorn in Kremlin's side. The officials didn't make any specific threats, but the inspection was not routine; it was out of the blue.

In the next days *The eXile's* sponsors pulled their funding from the magazine. The potential shutdown made news not just in Russia, but in the U.S. as well. Some outlets said that, given the frat-boy nature of *The eXile's* reporting, it was no loss to the journalistic community. Some saw it as a sign that anyone is now an easy target. Some, like the *Moscow Times*, thought this was part of a "positive image" PR campaign for Russia, stating: "The government seems so eager to promote a positive perception of the country that *The eXile*, a Moscow-based English-language tabloid, seems to have fallen victim to that goal. The publication closed earlier this month after investors withdrew their funding following a government inspection of its provocative content."

I know the editor of *The eXile*, Mark Ames. We shared a boat ride on Lake Baikal a couple of years ago, when Mark was doing a documentary about Baikal for a British channel. We were going to the same volunteer camp run by the Great Baikal Trail, a local non-profit intent on building a 2000-mile long hiking trail around the lake, and attracting tourists in the process. I talked to Mark about eco-tourism and told him about my experiences as a GBT volunteer (and about my American background). Curious about my Wall Street-to-Siberia journey, he asked me to repeat it on camera, so I



View of Cathedral of Christ the Savior.

ended up giving a short interview for his program.

I wrote Mark recently, and asked him about the government's attitude toward American journalists. He said, "They don't trust us, and they don't like us, but they know that they have to tolerate American journalists if they're from big newspapers with big "kryshas" [protection, or literally, a "roof" in Russian]. It's obviously gotten much worse since Putin came to power, but at the same time, during Yeltsin's time the American journalists uniformly served as shameless cheerleaders for Yeltsin and the "young reformers," who did more destroy Russia than even Genghis Khan. So the current people in power have good reason to view mainstream American journalists with not only suspicion, but with outright contempt."

According to Mark, *The eXile's* sponsors backed away once the magazine's edginess transformed from hypothetical danger to real danger. The sponsors have their business interests here, and it seems that one must act swiftly if one receives a signal of official discontent; there may not be a second chance to repent. Mark himself was planning to come back to the U.S., saying that "Russia has become boring and pseudo-prude, whereas America is collapsing fast and hard, and I want to be where the story is, which is America. I have a little experience now watching an empire collapse."

I caught Mark in person a couple of weeks later, when he came back to Moscow to gather the rest of his belongings — right in the middle of the Russian-Georgian war. He was on his way to buy a laptop cord at a market selling fake Chinese computer spare parts (apparently, none of the big computer manufacturers store or sell spare parts in Russia, for fear of counterfeiting), before heading down to Ossetia to report for *The Nation*. "It seems there's always something happening in Russia. People are tired of the mess in the Middle East, and this story is all over the front pages." When I asked him to elaborate on what he meant by Russia's pseudo-prudishness, he talked of the return to 'Russian family values,' pushed from the top by the cor-

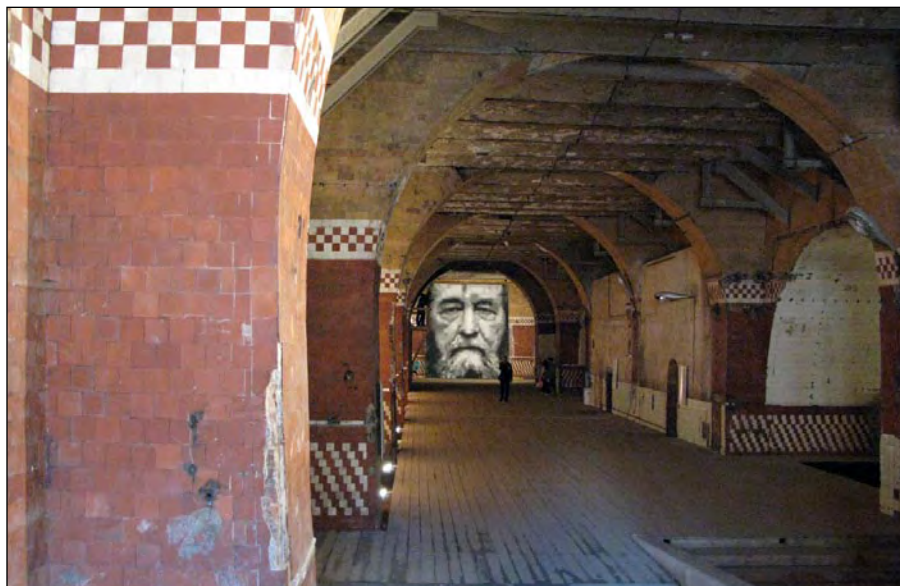


The author of this painting of naked Young Pioneers, made in the early 1980s, was 16 at the time. It's on display at Vinzavod, a former wine factory that now houses several modern art galleries and looks remarkably like hip, artsy areas of Brooklyn.

rupt elite that steals from the state treasury and murders with impunity.

I think hypocrisy is a better word for what's happening. That's what shook the Russian art world recently, when the curator of modern art at the Tretyakov Gallery was not only fired for organizing exhibitions of "offensive" Russian modern art, but the authorities started a criminal case against him for "inciting religious hatred." The art in question is from late 1960s through 2005, and includes pieces like a painting of two militia men kissing in a forest of birches, paintings with curse rhymes, and several paintings in the icon style in which God is replaced with Mickey Mouse. One artwork, dated 1985-86, is a do-it-yourself project titled "Light against dark." The participant is

The solemn face of Solzhenitsyn, Russia's moral voice for decades, put together out of white, grey, and black squares, hangs underground, in the back of one of Vinzavod's galleries. With him gone, who will speak up — and who will be heard?



invited to cut out images of a Russian Orthodox Church, several priests, and Komsomol members with axes and bats. The instruction suggests placing Komsomol figures around the church, the priests inside, setting everything on fire and throwing the ashes to the wind. The name of the game is "Young Atheist."

The exhibition (called "Forbidden Art-2006") took place in Sakharov's Museum, a space dedicated to Andrei Sakharov, a famous Soviet dissident, and to preserving the memory of those who suffered for their political views under the Soviet regime. All of the art was placed behind fake walls that had eye holes in them. Nationalistic organizations and people who haven't seen the exhibition wrote angry letters of protest, based on descriptions of the art, to their local newspapers and radio show hosts. The complaints said that such art offended their patriotic and religious feelings. I do wonder if the authors of these letters react with same outrage to the everyday cursing they hear on the streets, or if they would have been as vocal about the strength of their religious convictions in 1988, when the government was still sending people to prison for their beliefs.

As for my local militia, their ways are as inscrutable as the first day I set foot in their hallway. After waiting for a month and a half, as told, I came back to ask if my foreign travel passport was ready. The officer looked through the files, said that it wasn't ready, and then asked me, "Who told you it would be ready in a month and a half?!"

I said, "You did." He shook his head disapprovingly. "I tell everyone it'll be at least two months." As he finished his sentence, a back door of the office opened and a militia woman ushered a young girl into the photo booth. I did not see her in the long line of people waiting outside. □

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