

Jonathan Charley

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Reflections from a Moscow Diary, 1984–1994

## TIMELESS LABOR

Kolya is the ghost in the landscape. The grand laborer whose handprint is buried in every meter of the railways that streak the Russian landscape, whose footprints lie underneath every metropolitan construction, and whose price of labor is embedded in every grain of dust in the industrialised world. Kolya is the grand drunk whose mouth has touched every bottle in the journey from the medieval village commune to the twentieth-century urban labor market. His is the distant voice of the dispossessed serf, the wandering free laborer, liberated from all property save his power to labor on the building sites of Russia. Kolya is the absent memory of the hero who appeared as a vagabond. Olga was his love, the idealized peasant woman without whom the migration could never have begun. She is history's prostitute, farmer, mother, and wage earner, and her story lies hidden even deeper in the matter that marks the birth of the commodity world.

## THE MEMORY MAN

Crime, historical memory, and truth are held together by fragile threads that in dictatorships can wither to dust. At such moments the rule of law is reduced to its crudest form, a naked protection of ruling class interests. But let me introduce myself, I am the memory man. If you want a name, then Misha will do, although in the world I inhabit identity is an ephemeral condition.

In the depths of a Russian winter, the damp mists can seep into the bone, and by a similar process of stealth I can penetrate the unknown recesses of consciousness. In the old days they called me the policeman of the mind, the spider director of remembrance retrieval with a special brief to infiltrate the spaces of memory. As the orchestrator and obliterator of sanctioned recollections, my manifestations were varied and many. Whether eavesdropping at doors on the stair landings, swirling at the foot of Stalin's wedding cakes, or slithering up the concrete walls of the towers on the periphery, I have hovered throughout the world of matter and nonmatter, ambushing, violating, and highjacking all of the big questions concerning freedom, truth, and pleasure.

In the three decades of Stalin's rule, my tasks were relatively simple. There was only one memory, and those that remembered differently were criminals. One of my principal mnemonic devices was fear. I existed in the secret regimes of the Cheka, the GPU, NKVD, and KGB, enforcing allegiance to the institutions of family, state, and nation. But I could be subtle in my relentless quest to obscure and mask the nature of political and economic power, lurking in the texts of history books, and in the meanings attached to paintings, buildings, and other fetishes of the social world.

I enjoyed my job, erasing people from image and text, touching up photographs, writing lies, destroying monuments and building new ones. Such acts are central to the maintenance of a ruling class's hegemony, and form part of a program of legitimation organized within the culture industry that sets out to occupy the same time and space that was of symbolic value to the previous regime's attempt to appropriate the spirit.

In the 1920s I organized a general campaign of ecclesiastical destruction, seizing the sites of worship, dragging the patriarch to the ground, toppling the crosses from the cupolas, whitewashing the icons, and on one occasion turning a church into a shoe factory. I cleansed the streets of the bronzed statuesque reminders of religious and aristocratic figures and subsequently covered the city in slogans, carefully filling holes in the landscape with images of idealized hero workers. At my most profane I embalmed Lenin, and rolled back the buildings on Gorky Street, wide enough to conduct parades to his mausoleum in Red Square.

Being an aspatial and transhistorical phenomenon, I have been fickle in my alliances. But whoever has been in power, my job has been the same—to camouflage, to invert, and to invent.

## FEAR

Outside of the apartment there were few public spaces or large institutions that were immune from the creeping culture of inspection and observation. Almost all institutions possessed a room known as the *spyetz otdyel*, the special department. These were the state's control outposts run by clones of Gogol's madman and inspector. Zealous bureaucrats, they were steeped in the ancient art of spying, writing reports, and reciting shibboleths. As the guardian beetles of civic order they would scuttle around the panoptican labyrinth of numbered doors, brown corridors, and whispering telephones, with an eye open for any deviation, ready on the slightest provocation to order a visit.

In the popular memory there lies a sequence of sounds. The screeched brakes. The metal steps. The crack on the door. "You are under arrest." Have I time to take a last shot of vodka? The muscle arm clicks, the steps on the stairs repeat themselves, but this time multiplied, the engine growls and the black Volga heads for the Kazan station, the introduction to the gulag, no time to flag the vodka man.

## LUDMILLA IN 1932

Ludmilla gazed with astonishment as the workers pushed the architect into a wheelbarrow and carted him offsite. She had heard stories of how in the revolution of 1917 the “carting off” ceremony had been the ritual by which workers literally threw the factory managers out of the building. But this was all rather different. There had been a heated argument between state officials and the architects on one side and the building workers on the other. Many of the rank-and-file workers still felt sympathetic to the Left Opposition and Lev Davidovich Trotsky, who had been such a popular speaker in previous years at the Congresses of the Building Workers Trade Union in Moscow. The argument had started when the visiting authorities, fervent supporters of Stalin, issued thinly barbed warnings to angry workers who had objected to what they considered to be the further extension of capitalist work practices, such as one-man management and piece rates, and to the ludicrous demands for productivity increases that would have reduced the most enthusiastic of shock workers to a stooping shadow.

Everyone had laughed as the ridiculed officials brushed down their suits at the edge of the site, but Ludmilla sensed that their actions would have violent repercussions. There were stories circulating of people being arrested for what were called “anti-Soviet” activities. She was frightened not least because she was determined not to jeopardize her newly won position as a painter and decorator. Ten years before she had tried to read some of Alexandra Kollantai’s articles and although she did not understand everything, she liked the talk of how life for women would be completely different under socialism. In any case it seemed to her that the dispute was more a case of boys toughing it out.

They were building a block of flats not far from the Moscow River. It was designed by a man called Golosov and was dominated by a triumphal arched entrance, flanked by statues of armed workers. Sitting high on the scaffold she was struck by how different the shapes of the constructions were, compared with those she had seen in street demonstrations and in pictures at one of the public art exhibitions in the 1920s. There she had seen paintings by women that were colorful and dynamic, if a little bit odd, and she had liked the images of shiny buildings made from concrete, glass, and steel. By comparison the heavy decorative stonework of the front wall that she was painting was rather disappointing, too solid, too sad, and far too redolent of a past that she at least would have preferred to have forgotten.



## VODKA IN THE LATE 1980s

*If the cap fits let him wear it.*

*and when the cork flips*

*let them drink it to the bottom.*

It is a foolish and amnesiac government that thinks it can curtail alcohol consumption by closing down the off-licenses and bars. It is surprising in retrospect, that this act alone in the mid-1980s, tantamount to a direct assault on the Russia soul, did not prompt an immediate insurrection. But by then the Moscow citizen was more than used to the moral puritanism of the Party and had invented a thousand ways of avoiding it. There are three immediate reasons why programs of enforced abstinence are doomed to failure. In the first place, you cannot prevent the pursuit of pleasure by abolishing the object of desire. That which is banned inevitably becomes available underground or floating in the city's unregulated interspaces. Second, a government loses immense amounts of revenue through the subsequent drop in taxes. Third, the anti-alcohol campaign did little to address the root causes of a history of alcoholism that had touched all sectors of the population. But this did not deter the authorities from trying.

Badges were distributed to the youth proclaiming them to be members of the Society of Sobriety. Stalwart Communists proclaimed the life-enhancing properties of Soviet mineral water, and leaders in full view of the camera proudly consumed green bottles of sparkling metal liquid. The streets were cleared of the vodka-dispensing shot stalls, leaving behind rusting soda-water machines and the odd Kvas pump. The front pages of *Pravda* printed parables about drunk tractor drivers running their fathers over in the fields, and along with editorials in the rest of the media chastized the demon spirit for instigating the collapse in productivity levels and the disintegration of family life. But the fifty-ruble-a-night Militia hotels, temporary prisons for the purposes of drying out, continued to be fully booked, and the frozen corpses of the vodka sleepers were still being picked up from the morning streets.

Alcohol production never stopped, and a trickle continued to bleed onto the streets with a characteristically Muscovite unpredictability as to time and place. This made the process of procurement a tedious game of detection, one that demanded a fierce attention to duty. If you hit them at the right time, the big shops on Stolichniye Pereulok and Prospect Kalinina normally had something, maybe even a bottle of Cuban rum. Then there was the *samagon*, homemade vodka that when nurtured in the hands of an able peasant and flavored with an earthy blend of herbs and spices could

taste of Russian history—but when forced by the fists of a heretic could induce a chemical blindness.

Restaurants were a safer bet with respect to vodka but not to gangsters. Run like little fiefdoms, the grandest of these—such as the Hotel Moskva on Revolution Square; Stalin's favorite, the Aragvi; or the Ukraine Hotel—were pictures of still time and faded aristocracy. In parodies of palatial bourgeois dining rooms, penguin-suited troupes of disinterested waiters and waitresses would thread through the mirrors, red carpets, and pastel walls, dropping drinks, fish in aspic, and salads onto the table. Up on the stage a carefully sanitized cabaret would tick along to pirouetting Hula-Hoop dancing girls, flashing beneath the spinning silver ball of a seventies light show. The attached band of metronomic musicians play transcontinental easy listening, and with a twist of the imagination and several rounds of champagne and vodka chasers, the white nightmare descends; the diner rises to the dance floor and for a minute is transported to 1920s kitsch Berlin.

At the other end of the consumer hierarchy were the queues of dedicated drinkers at the perfume counter, the oral consumption of Russian eau de cologne performing the double function of getting you pissed and covering up the smell of stale urine. For casual spontaneous drinkers there were a whole number of options. One of the most reliable was to stand in the middle of the road at any time of the night making a V-sign pointed at one's own throat. This was not a gesture of violence but a message to ambulance men, taxi drivers, and opportunist militia that you needed a bottle. Buying it this way at three in the morning was expensive. But when the argument of a Russian night explodes, there is a ritual the performance of which is a necessity.



*When the vodka has chilled and possesses the viscosity of runny honey it is ready to drink. Poured neat into 50 ml glasses, it is thrown back with a single snap of the head, but not before two plates have been laid on the table. One that displays slices of black rye bread, the other pickled gherkins. The consumption of these three items is the ignition sequence that can lead to lasting friendship but can as easily disintegrate into tears, regret, and even murder.*

## THE REBELLIOUS HOME

Unlike advanced capitalist nations in which the assimilation of resistance has become so common as to be unnoticeable, in the USSR the public en-

actment of difference and defiance was illegal. For decades the culture of opposition hid, revealing itself in the crowded, smoky sitting rooms of the *kvartira*, or in the timber dacha deep in the silver birch forests. It was in these irreverent dark woody spaces, filled with sofa bed, books, rugs, and paintings, that philosophy and politics could be dismembered, and sex and deviant beliefs celebrated.

At the epicenter, lit by a yellow lamp, stood the low table on which the debris of glasses, ashtrays, and *zakuski* would accumulate as the toasts flowed until everyone, and every hope, had been drunk to in a festival of daring self-affirmation.

## NEW YEAR'S EVE

Vodka is the silent guest at every gathering. It was New Year's Eve in 1987, and none of the guests had arrived. Having long before spent any remaining hard currency, I stood with everyone else in the queues for vodka. Everyone, that is, except for smart people and apparatchiks, who had their own shops and contacts. The Muscovite had long since grown accustomed to waiting, but while queuing had become a daily sufferance for unconnected citizens, there was always the possibility of a surprise, which is why you never left home without a bag. A lorry might approach through the slush and mist, skid to a stop, and throw open its doors to reveal plump Hungarian chickens. But then again it might be a pickup truck carrying only cabbages, which would be unceremoniously dumped on the ground as if the driver had mistaken the people for cattle.

But on this night I was scouring one of the immense citadel estates that butt up to the circular ring road surrounding Moscow. If the sun was shining you could blink and imagine the twenty-story towers as monuments in the park; but in the depths of winter they became canyons of wrinkled sentry boxes, graveyards of accelerated urbanization. Though lacking in shops and social infrastructure they would at least possess a *Univermag* Supermarket, and it was out of the back doors of one of these that a queue had formed, snaking its way across the snow between the blocks of flats in a line that must have been anything up to a kilometer long. Word was out on the estate that a delivery truck was rumbling our way. The rumor was strong enough to make people endure what turned out to be a three-hour wait to reach the steel doors of vodka heaven. In a temperature of minus twenty Celsius, fires had been lit along its length, scattering embers of heated conversations into the snow.

As we stood sandwiched between old muzhiks, math professors, the odd babushka, and a cross-section of the unfaithful, stories and lives



were exchanged at liberty, freezing breath joining one face to another. In the crystal air the metallic shotgun clang of the doors cracked over head. Murmurs quickly spread along the line that it was two bottles only. Conversations changed to bullet one-liners as the snake began to wriggle in anticipation. Ignoring the waiting queue, crews of demobbed paratroopers and determined alcoholics pushed in at the front. The militia men stood to one side with a collective shrug. With no one else likely to confront the vodka bandits it appeared for a moment that all was lost and the unthinkable had happened: the vodka would be highjacked and New Year's Eve would be sober.

But no one should underestimate the women in white coats. They appear everywhere—on hotel landings, reception desks of buildings, cloak-rooms, toilets, shops, and factories. A secret army dressed in medical overalls, hair permed with a color tint, wearing black galoshes, and carrying sixteen stone, their stares alone could reduce an outlaw to apology. From behind the metal grill in what was no more than a large refrigerator they reimposed order by threatening to close up. Bruised and battered after struggling through a storm of curses and flailing arms, I reached the counter and made the purchase.

Armed in both pockets, pulling the flaps down over my ears I hurtled through the ice and slush to the metro on Yaroslavskoye Shosse with what I reckoned was just enough time to meet my friends at the Pushkin monument. There, standing on Tverskaya Ulitsa, is the figure of the deeply ponderous Ethiopian-Russian poet. Circled by benches of conversation and flower beds, this is an immemorial place of rendezvous, the prelude to a night of illicit romance and Muscovite sabotage. Such moments in Soviet life when the town was turned into a circus were moments of free time. The crowds made the task of moral observance impossible; corks popped, the caps of vodka bottles were jettisoned, and for a moment public space became public again. As momentary concessions from government, carnivals serve the function of soaking up anger, and with fireworks illuminating the squares and boulevards, the noise of laughter and obscenity crashed off the stone walls of Gorky Street past the Hotel Moskva and down toward Red Square. The Kremlin bells peeled midnight, as the iced honey warmed the body. The humming multitude erupted and a group of first-generation punks screamed "Fuck the Communist Party."

## WORSHIP

1. It was Easter time in Zagorsk, one of the major spiritual homes of the Orthodox Church. In the entrance to the dark incensed gloom a generation of



solo women were writing their prayers on scraps of paper and leading them to be blessed. She must have been ninety or a hundred and fifty, and she shakingly wrote, "God save the tsar."

2. The worship of bombs is one of the worst of all surrenders. These were not firecrackers but SS20 missiles gliding past on party floats, enjoying the breadth of the boulevards that surround the inner core of the city. The audience cheered and waved flags at the weapons of mass destruction heading home to the sleeping pen.

3. The families were picnicking on the banks of the Moscow River, staring across the muddy torrent to the Beliye Dom. With mouths full of gherkin their synchronized eyes followed the missile's trajectory. "Hurrah, hurrah, another fine hit," sang the happy picnickers, as the front face of the parliament burst into flame.

## 1991 TELEPHONE

"Yuri Pavlovich, is that you?"

"Djonatanchick, it's good to hear your voice."

"Are you all right? What's going on?"

"Everything's fine, the tanks are rolling down the streets as normal."

## MISHA'S RETURN

My years in the subconscious mind convinced me that historical memory is not a free choice—it is a loaded gun. I would only add that it is not loaded just with bullets, but with the poisons that accompany manufactured nostalgia.

## MORE VANDALISM IN THE 1990s

In the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx comments that when history repeated itself the first time, it became known as tragedy. The second time, as farce. But what does history become when it repeats itself a third, fourth, or fifth time? This is what I asked myself when the Soviet system collapsed in the 1980s. With the disintegration of the mirage of a unitary ideology, belief fragmented into a thousand claims on truth, forming a "free market" of meaning in which the notion of authentic memory was finally murdered. The question of the distortion of reality became redundant as a new virus emanated from the history machine, declaring reality to be wholly illusory. In its place a pluralist historical relativism was installed, the rest-

But in their rural virtual villages, for a moment they could return to an idealized peasant world of picking mushrooms and growing cucumbers. Unlike, however, the clusters of dachas that Muscovites retreat to at the weekend, private fortified compounds like this one did not appear on maps.

I had grown to despise the parasitic habits of the old functionaries. As a boy they had tried to get me committed to a mental ward when, as a previously loyal Komsomol, I started making effigies of Brezhnev. My father's military contacts saved me. Covert in my rebellion, I drove the meat and vodka faces to all of their secret haunts; dining rooms and wine cellars hidden in mountains, luxury shops disguised as offices, bars on the thirtieth floor, and forest gambling clubs. I would usually sit in the car, chain-smoking, imagining every cigarette as a named bullet, thinking of how in the morning they would make grotesque speeches about the toiling masses. More devious than a vulture, when the time came in the 1980s to change their clothing, they were faster than the emperor.

We stopped at a recently built brick cottage. I followed my employer into a sparse whitewashed living room. Greetings were exchanged in Uzbek and we sat around the table for a tea ceremony with three newly awoken tracksuited hardmen. This was a new phenomenon, a previous generation of state criminal rulers living as neighbors with representatives of a new gang of swindlers and usurpers of power.

I was left to watch World Cup football as the balcony became a heated exchange market. Returning from outside and brandishing a sword that he had unsheathed from an imperial leather scabbard, the main track-suit sauntered across the parquet floor toward me. "This is the parade sword of the last Tsar, have a feel." Surrounded by the remnants of the old Communist Party and representatives of the new mob, a plan began to form. Stroking the meter-long gold-plated razor blade, I could already read the headlines.

Today in a village on the outskirts of Moscow, a maniac monarchist armed with a priceless relic from the last Tsar's armory ran amok, slaying the last remaining relatives of previous Party leaders, in what he announced as a revenge attack for the execution of the royal family in 1917. Three as yet unidentified men in blue-and-white regulation tracksuits were also found at the crime scene.

Or alternatively:

Today in a village on the outskirts of Moscow, a maniac Communist armed with a priceless relic from the last Tsar's armory ran amok, slaying the last remaining relatives of previous Party leaders, in what he announced as a revenge attack for the execution of

stone steeples of buildings and too deeply in the souls of citizens. In all of this the thirst for truth and memory is matched only by the equal and opposite desire to forget.

## TRUE STORY—TEA WITH CRIMINALS

I studied philosophy at the Moscow State University and had graduated by impersonating a parrot. But philosophy is a poorly paid profession, and I opted for a career as a chauffeur. I longed for the opportunity to screech across Red Square into the Kremlin; you know the shot, it's the one where the whistle-blowing militia part the masses for a high-speed black car that hurtles through an arch and disappears into the wall. But for most of the time I was assigned to ferrying minor Party functionaries around the city, barely enduring their petty jealousies. I broke this routine up by doing a bit of taxi work, selling vodka, and ripping off tourists with crushed eggplant dressed up as caviar. When the Party collapsed I started driving for a new generation of hungry power brokers. This was more lucrative, because unlike the old guard the modern-day gangsters liked to flash their money; it was all right to be rich again, and I got to drive better cars.

But you had to be careful. During the hot summer months of the early 1990s, at five in the afternoon, it was best to avoid standing near a BMW in the center of Moscow. That was when they tended to explode. But on this particular day I was away from the bullfight, circling around the Moscow ring road in a Lada jeep, stopping off for my client to pick up pay-offs at some of the more infamous peripheral estates that punctured the July horizon. Closer to an anarchic game show than a tarmacked motorway, the ring road is a place where reason is suspended and all are invited to play chicken with the monumental trucks carrying piles of concrete and steel that career between the potholes.

Toward the end of the afternoon we turned off and plunged deep into a silver birch forest. After driving up a single-lane track for ten minutes, we came to a gate in a high steel fence flanked by soldiers. An exchange of passwords and dollars, and we crossed over a no-man's-land of stunted grass toward another armed sentry post. The same ritual took place and we entered into a little village of dachas. Scattered between the trees and joined by a tarmac road were a collection of modest single-story cottages, country retreats for the siblings and relatives of previous presidents and well-placed bureaucrats—including, it was said, a great-nephew of Lenin.

In the center of the city the Party elite crudely disguised its wealth and power by labeling it state property. Propped up by a culture of paranoia, they would rarely appear outside of iconic and choreographed spectacles.



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the Bolshevik Party in the 1920s and '30s. Three as yet unidentified men in blue-and-white regulation tracksuits were also found at the crime scene.

## SMOKING

One of the slang names for hashish in Russia was the word "plan." A smart piece of irony, since if the plan could not be fulfilled, which it rarely if ever was, you could always smoke it.

## THE BABUSHKA

The fable of the Russian Babushka is endless. She sits in every eye shot. She is indeed majestic like her sister Bahiana in Brazil. Pregnant with memory, she sits in the park with her friends, guards the entrances and exits, tells the stories, and mourns for the millions dead. Now she stands at the metro selling a loaf of bread or a solitary tulip. But she has stiff competition from the professors who are there selling bouquets. Everyone waits at the foot of the grand underground.

## KOLYA IN 1994

Kolya peeled away the gluey mucus that held his eyes shut. Stumbling upward his head spun with the alcohol nausea that rushed through every limb. He had never dreamed that his journey to Moscow would have ended like this, prostrate beneath the statue of Yuri Gagarin. The hangover lurked with a vengeance and Kolya became uncontrollably hungry. Searching his pockets he found one last gulp of vodka and a piece of black bread. Feeling better he squatted down on the pavement and stared up the Lenin Prospect. For a moment the spring sun seemed to pick out the gilt on horse-drawn carriages and the whole street seemed to be ablaze as he thought of god, tsars, monasteries, and peasants. He shook his head, blinked, but this time saw nothing other than the letter *B*, for Banks, BMWs, Bananas, Bullets, and Bandits.

## COUPS

As sure as winter comes to the streets of Moscow, so in autumn does the Russian mind turn to revolution. At the height of the confrontation in 1991, when the general's tanks were rolling, the streets were pillaged for building materials and a series of barricades were constructed from all manner of tim-

ber, metal, and concrete. These were the last line of defense in front of the Russian parliament.

A week after the direct street confrontations had subsided, I was walking down the Prospect Kalinina, the showpiece sixties boulevard that rips westward through the city from the Kremlin. People had stopped on the bridge near the Beliye Dom where the Prospect crosses the inner ring road. Flowers, ribbons, and printed messages surrounded the photograph of a young man, flanked by a glass of vodka and some rye bread. He had been crushed by a tank in the underpass below and this was his commemoration.

In the gray rain of a Moscow autumn, the spontaneous construction of a Russian grave on a public thoroughfare spoke louder than any institutionalized act of remembrance. This was the people not the state remembering, and it should have been left, the vodka glass refilled and the bread replaced on a daily basis, until the whole construction had seeped into the pavements, permanently etched into the city's memory.

In the days of the putsch, many had lived and slept on the barricades. A large section of them remained, an explosion of strangulated debris that, had it been in a gallery, would have been hailed as an installation art masterpiece. Here, watched over by its civilian guards peering out from makeshift tents, it was an unforgettable expression of defiance. The few youths who remained told me of their campaign to have it kept as a monument, a warning beacon to anyone intent on the illegal seizure of power. Two days later in the middle of the night it was bulldozed, so as to leave no physical trace of the uprising.

Out of the shadows appeared new guards dressed in tsarist uniforms, there to protect the entrances to the Beliye Dom. The red flag slid down the mast, and the banner of the imperial Russian eagle was resurrected. From the top of the bell tower the mischievous memory man sings a lament for an older fictitious Russia, a fable in which there exists little trace of the might of a citizenry mobilized against oppression. It is at this point that memory ceases to function.