

REVIEWS

Andrew Meier, *Black Earth. A Journey Through Russia After the Fall*,
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UNDER FOND WESTERN EYES

How the Western exchange students used to puzzle us, their Soviet dorm-mates, back in the early eighties at Moscow State University. Many had arrived expecting to see tanks in the streets and police patrols with barking dogs. Instead, they found the very safe, if impossibly sprawling, imperial capital of the USSR; and seemed impressed to be able to buy Soviet shampoo or ballpoint pens—which we, frankly, would rather have exchanged for what we saw as their infinitely more elegant and reliable bics. And when it came to the end of their year-long stay in our cold climes, these exotic yet earnest creatures would infallibly moan, ‘Oh, how I hate the thought of going back to Princeton (Oxford, Tokyo, Uppsala)’. They had caught the bug.

But what bug? What fascination could there be in the Stalinist grannies with their red armbands, zealously checking passes at the University entrance, or the overboiled buckwheat gruel and sticky stroganoff in the student canteen? True, there was a lot of inventiveness in the many little subversive tricks one had to play on the system, in order to navigate its irrational innards. You could not just walk into the campus bookshop or library, as at Princeton, and pick up what you wanted to read. The good things were not readily available—either too much in demand, ‘ideologically suspect’, or both. To buy a volume of Fernand Braudel meant camping outside the shop, long before opening hours, on a tip-off from a friend with publishing connections; and then snapping up not just one book but the whole crate, for

friends back at the dorm or as exchange currency—to barter, say, for Ray Bradbury. (I got my copy of *The Wretched of the Earth* for an old *Playboy*.) Or you might befriend a young lady librarian at *Spetskhran*, the ‘special’ restricted-access collection of foreign material, and beg to borrow something illicit, like *New Left Review*, overnight, to binge read until the small hours. True, too, that whenever we got together, in the kitchens or on the stairwells, we would chain-smoke, drink and talk about whatever lay outside the stale official ideology: from Fellini’s *Amarcord* and Djilas’s *New Class* to Pink Floyd and the sexual revolution. In retrospect, there were many thrilling moments for us young intellectual smugglers; especially since the Soviet system had become too sclerotic to catch us, and adolescent fascination with breaking the rules was usually safe.

During perestroika, an encounter with a husband-and-wife team of co-practising Californian therapists provided a useful insight into why the young Slavic enthusiasts seemed so terribly earnest to us. This prosperous pair were early arrivals among the motley crew of missionaries who—earnestly, of course—sought to help improve the newly liberated Russia, after America’s own image. They had come to spread the word about a fashionable mental-wellness technique called neuro-linguistic programming, which involved the detection and evaluation of the interlocutor’s psychological defence mechanisms, before the therapist attempted to establish a rapport. Ranging from jokes to facial expressions, body language and eye movement, such mechanisms are—as they explained to me, their interpreter, over drinks on our last evening—to be found in all socially competent humans, serving to hide what one might feel like keeping to oneself. A ‘normal’ adult should have about eight such subconscious devices, used interchangeably; a reclusive personality might display a dozen; over twenty was clear cause for alarm. In the car from the airport and over our first dinner, the Californians had counted twenty-seven defence mechanisms in my behaviour; next morning at breakfast they detected a couple more. Within a few days, they realized that we, the natives, all possessed dozens of pre-rational tricks which we would casually wield in interactions with strangers, while remaining polite and intellectually engaged—if perhaps a little too cynical for American tastes. Their models, they came to understand, summarized not an abstract human norm but the mean measurements of their native Orange County. Young urban Soviets carried, on average, thrice thicker insulation.

These insulating layers, however, were worn situationally, like clothing; their thickness depended on the interaction’s setting. In the endless queues, or at official meetings, the therapists might have observed further defensive quirks of Soviet behaviour: we could go super-cynically chatty or, conversely, self-induce a deep trance state, which we regarded as simply falling asleep with our eyes open. But the carapace could also get much thinner, and then

the clicks and sparks of human connexion could fly in every direction. In the informal circles of friends, and friends of friends—like-minded people, summarily referred to as *vse svoi*, ‘all ours’—defences could be dropped altogether; and then what Saint-Exupéry, cult author for the educated Soviet generation of the sixties and seventies, termed the ‘sumptuousness of human interaction’ would freely flow. And here, most probably, lies the bug that so many Westerners catch. A visiting scholar from Berkeley, of all places, expressed it succinctly, if perhaps too sweepingly: ‘America is an emotional desert’.

Emotional variety and intensity of experience surely provide a better explanation than Slavophilic ruminations on spirituality to the question why, generation after generation, Russia continues to fascinate Westerners. The great sociologists, Goffman, Collins, Stinchcombe, might help us to understand not only the nature of the attraction but also its source: the persistent under-institutionalization of Russian life. No longer a *Gemeinschaft* community, bound and scripted by traditions—with the possible exception of places like Chechnya—nevertheless, Russia ever since Peter the Great has recurrently fallen short of the capitalist *Gesellschaft* where, in theory at least, a cold and formal rationality should govern the greater part of human interaction. In the Soviet Union, so the old joke went, a problem would be fixed with a sledgehammer and a lot of hearty swearing. The reason it could not be otherwise was that, for most of its history, Russia has been suspended in some kind of transition: never a finished ‘thing’, but always catching up or falling behind the West. This, incidentally, illuminates another advantage enjoyed by Western visitors in the eighties—the flattering boost to their personal status, in a country where all things Western were matters of great curiosity: desirable, exotic yet unattainable, and often forbidden. Lastly, one could feel another exhilarating emotion in the Soviet Union during its final years; one that Bakunin, describing Paris in 1848, had called the emotional inebriation of revolution. The subterranean roar of the coming earthquake was felt everywhere; but in burying the USSR, it left rubble in its wake.

Andrew Meier is one of those Western Slavists who, arriving in the last years of the Soviet Union, caught the bug and stayed on in Russia for too long to remain the same person; but also got beyond the early exuberance of initiation into Russian life. Taken on, after a while, as *Time* magazine’s Moscow correspondent, his book *Black Earth* is in part an account of experiences that his Washington editors did not want to run. Although Meier’s work has been compared to David Remnick’s *Lenin’s Tomb* (1993) and *Resurrection* (1997)—both authors have produced vast and complex canvases, veritable encyclopaedias of post-communist Russia, packed with evocative micro-pictures and colourfully drawn characters—the two depict quite different countries. Where Remnick saw ‘resurrection’, the

misty dawn of something new and promising—and has been accused of Clintonite apologias for Yeltsin's 'reforms'—Meier paints a gloomier picture of the vast country, struggling to keep on track and find its place in the world; or, Russia as usual.

Meier's title comes from Mandelstam:

How pleasing fatty topsoil is to ploughshare,
 How silent the steppe in its April upheaval!
 Well, I wish you well, black earth: be firm, sharp-eyed . . .
 A black-voiced silence is at work

Steeped in the country's literature, it is perhaps the most poetic, in its tonality and composition, of all the recent crop of journalistic offerings on the country's post-socialist drift; in this sense, it reaches back to Gogol's *Dead Souls* or even Radishchev's *Journey from St Petersburg to Moscow*. Chekhov's 1890 trip to Sakhalin Island, to report on the plight of the *katorzhane*, the shackled labourers in the Tsarist penal colonies there, is one of many thick threads that weave Russia's past into its present. Meier also differs from Western chroniclers such as Chrystia Freeland or David Hoffman in his unwillingness to restrict himself to the new, or reminted, ruling class, in the Moscow palaces, offices, salons, shopping malls and nightclubs that have served as the backdrop for so many of his colleagues' coverage of Russia's 'transition' over the last decade.

Instead, he looks beyond Moscow, and below the level of the *nouveaux riches*, to what he sees as the common Russians, and some Chechens, of the provinces. In this sense, Meier's work might be seen as a continuation of the critical realist tradition of the *narodniki*, who left the capital to wander among the 'people', observing their difficult lives and finding examples of human dignity amid 'the mud, stench, and violence' of ordinary existence—a literary and intellectual lineage that is now almost extinct among Russians themselves. Both refreshing and, in some respects, frustrating, this is quite literally a pedestrian view of reality: in all his years in Russia, Meier never acquired a car but would flag down a lift—'voting', as it is called—to share in the life and conversation of his chance host at the steering wheel. The choice, as he presents it, is fundamentally a moral one—to stay with the people, to experience ordinary Russia and the vastness of its distances.

For *Black Earth* is a travelogue of epic proportions. Though he begins and ends in Moscow, the centre in every sense, Meier takes us to all points of the compass. North to Norilsk, sailing slowly along the great Siberian river Yenisei, as the mountains turn to plains and then to tundra; passing the Soviet-era nuclear facilities buried in the rocks, the place of Stalin's exile in the 1910s, the remnants of camps. Once run by the Gulag, today the Arctic Circle mining town is controlled by the multibillion-dollar financial-industrial

conglomerate of Vladimir Potanin, who rose in less than a decade from being an inconspicuous young functionary at the Ministry of Foreign Trade to join the murderous inner circle of Russia's super rich. Potanin acquired a controlling stake in Norilsk Nickel for \$170 million—a fraction of its true value—in an auction rigged in his favour by the government, as reward for his vital donations to Yeltsin's 1996 presidential campaign. Like the other oligarchs, Potanin mostly keeps his vast fortune 'offshore', safe from his partners, shareholders, tax collectors and, of course, his employees. The workers, however, get something like \$700 a month—enviable wages by contemporary Russian standards—and so endure the Norilsk landscape of industrial devastation, the ferociously cold climate, the isolation and the months-long darkness of Arctic night. What happens to the non-essential population—children, pensioners, or the workers whose jobs the new managers consider redundant—is quite a different story.

East, from Vladivostok and Ussuriysk, just north of the PRC border—where Meier finds a Chinese bazaar of cargo ship containers swollen into a village, stalls brimming with knock-off copies of Western designer labels (ДКЗУ)—to the foul weather and sullen prostitutes of Sakhalin, whose southern tip is only a narrow strait but, economically and socially, an ocean away from Japan. The spectacle of anomie, economic depression, reigning corruption and organized crime might just as well be witnessed by a suburban train ride of no more than fifteen minutes in any direction outside Moscow's city limits; but its reputation as Alexander 11's Devil's Island makes Sakhalin, inevitably, a more exotic location. Meier manages to trace descendants of the *katorzhane*, proud to find their family name in Chekhov's extensive database—he filed some 7,500 report cards—of what would today be 'human-rights violations'.

West, by the midnight train, to the damp and decrepit 'northern capital', where Meier, inevitably, conjures literary ghosts—but also the infamous one-armed godfather of the post-Soviet underworld, Vladimir Kumarin, who lost his limb not, as per jet-set rumour, in Afghanistan but during the mafia wars that raged in the politically fractured and violently contested landscape of Petersburg in the 1990s. And finally south, to Chechnya, which occupies a special place in Meier's travelogue; and for good reason. The 'Zone', as many insiders almost superstitiously call it, is a place apart. Meier goes there on his own, to investigate the killings of (mainly) elderly Chechen civilians in the village of Aldy, shortly after it was taken by Russian forces in February 2000.

For anyone who has been following the tragedy of this tiny country in the Caucasus, the picture will be all too familiar. On one side there are the Chechens, most of them struggling to live in the 'small corner of hell' that their land has become; some, if not many, of whom have been helping—for

ideological, family or pecuniary reasons, or just out of fear—the men with guns, such as the notorious Shamil Basayev, who pass variously as armed resistance fighters, terrorists, Islamic jihadists or bandits and warlords. On the other side are the Russian troops, faced with a shortage of almost everything a modern army might expect: discipline, clear lines of command, steady supplies, career prospects, professional skills or even camaraderie. Nor does this army possess any clear ideological commitment, beyond a seething rage over the humiliation of Soviet superpower. When the troops get angry—at everything, perhaps—or feel threatened and frustrated by unseen Chechen snipers, and with no fear of punishment from their superiors, they commit such horrors as happened in Aldy.

Meier tends to rely too much on psychological explanations for my sociological taste, but in this instance he may be right. The killings were probably not a part of any Russian plan. They flowed from the brutality of this shadowy war with unclear goals and strategy, where the weak Russian state prefers to cover up the ‘indulgencies’ and criminal mayhem wrought by its underpaid and dispirited soldiery, because otherwise, nobody would fight against Chechen separatism—and Moscow refuses to learn how to deal with the problem in any other way. The imploded post-Soviet state is so weak, institutionally and morally, that the decaying rump of the army may be all it has left at its disposal.

There is, however, a more sinister aspect. In St. Petersburg, Meier tracks down the commander of the Special Police unit that was in Aldy at the time the massacre was perpetrated. The officer agrees to meet with the American journalist and—the usual tactic—admits the obvious fact, that the village was situated in his unit’s ‘area of competence’, in order to deny the accusations and profess complete ignorance of the crimes. For whatever reason, the officer invites Meier to lunch and even introduces him to his wife; who, like many of his soldiers’ wives, also works for the Special Police. As the conversation goes on, it becomes clear without direct admission: yes, they were there, and who else would have done it? Of course the officer knows. But he does not regret it. Perhaps because he is angry, with the professional anger of the uniformed man, to whom state coercion is not just a job but a social identity. He is angry because the police are underpaid, like all state servants in Russia—even if they are in a position to devise other means of income. But at a deeper, existential level he is permanently angry that people no longer respect or fear enough his uniform and his special role in life. This seems a typical feeling among the more active supporters of Putin’s return to ‘normalcy’.

Like any true epic, *Black Earth* encompasses not just war but quest and discovery; heroism; love in an unlikely setting (a tiny gem: a Gulag prison guard proposes to a woman inmate and pledges to await her release); horrendous suspicion, with no possibility of resolution (a Soviet general, taken

prisoner by the Germans in the early days of the war, later accused by the NKVD of joining a Nazi execution squad); tales of survival, in Stalin's time and today; bitter irony and humour; and even literary-historical sex, in the form of Chekhov's curiously equine description—written, on lavender-coloured paper in his elegant, miniature hand, to his publisher, Suvorin—of his encounter with a Japanese girl in a Sakhalin brothel: 'In the act she exhibits such sublime mastery that you feel no longer a customer but a rider in an equestrian lesson of the finest school'. (The letter had been hidden away by Soviet archivists as a potential affront to the honour of the nation's great classical tradition.) The main tonality of *Black Earth*, however—and here it is not so different from many other Western works—is that of a vast tragedy, of a ruined country and a deceived people who meet their fate with stoicism; for what else remains?

The book presents a striking mosaic of contemporary Russia, teeming with characters, from old dissident intellectuals to pauperized workers and students, moguls, policemen and racketeers; Putin enters at the end, inauspicious as this former secret agent tends to be; the latest Russian enigma. Yet the author scarcely attempts to indicate any causal linkages between the many facets of this vast canvas. At most, Meier recurrently turns to the discussion of how the Russians—unlike West Germans after 1945—have failed to repent of their guilty authoritarian past, in which he evidently sees the source of their troubles and misery. One is tempted to ask: what of Japan's hidden authoritarian history, and its relation to the dynamics of the post-war economy? Here, no doubt, lies the reason why *Black Earth* could garner praise from Brzezinski and Conquest for its dust jacket: paragons of the view that Russia is totalitarian by its very nature. Inside Russia, and especially within the intellectual elite, the publishers might have found even more authoritative voices to issue moral condemnations of the country's past.

Following the dictum of Major Makarov, the infamous political instructor at Moscow State University's Division of Military Training—'our Soviet propaganda does not leave any questions unanswered, even rhetorical ones'—let me briefly suggest an alternative explanation. Meier correctly senses some sort of tragic incompleteness, perhaps even a dangerous unwholeness, in Russia's transformation. But he fails to recognize that the incoherence lies not in social morality but in political economy, and public institutions. Its cause is not the psychology but the truncation of the Russian revolutionary sequence. There is, after all, a price to be paid for avoiding full-blown revolution.

Stalinism was a particularly brutal, despotic and over-militarized variety of what, a generation ago, Chalmers Johnson—referring to modern Japan—termed the developmental state. Its strategy was to concentrate control of economic assets in the hands of the central bureaucracy; the populace would be treated as a sub-species of asset, either as labour force or military recruits;

all such forces would then be directed towards the goal of catching up with the advanced capitalist countries. The name of Bismarck is firmly associated with this coercive strategy, although its lineage may be traced back to Absolutist statesmen such as Colbert or, for that matter, Peter the Great. The ideological colouring of the Soviet regime, combined with the Cold War climate, prevented thinkers on both right and left from recognizing it as a particular variety of ultra-bureaucratic developmental state, whose strategic goals and means belonged squarely within the spectrum of contemporary reactions to the geopolitical and economic collapse at the core of the world-system, between 1914 and 1945.

The pinnacle of Soviet developmentalism was the victory of 1945. During the war, the USSR had produced almost three times as many tanks as the whole Nazi Reich (despite the fact that Moscow had been begging the Germans in vain, as late as 1929, to impart the secrets of their armour-plating technology, counter to Versailles strictures). The Soviet economy continued to grow at impressive rates for almost two decades and, under Khrushchev, finally began to benefit the population; from the late 1960s, however, it began to slow down. Brezhnev, commonly blamed for the stagnation, was not the cause but merely a symptom. Vladimir Popov has suggested an elegant theoretical formulation which relates the strengths and weaknesses of a command economy to the different phases in its material life cycle. Given the support of the necessary state institutions, such an economy should normally be more successful than capitalist markets in achieving short and medium-term targets in the mass production of material output, such as is needed for rapid industrialization or winning wars. However, the effectiveness of this type of economic apparatus declines rapidly after approximately thirty years when, in Popov's estimate, the amortization of over half the industrial assets reaches the point of replacement. For this task, command economies of the Soviet variety possessed neither the appropriate legal and organizational mechanisms nor the ideological justification. It could simply prove impossible to restructure or shut down an obsolete factory that had once served as the pride of the first Five Year Plan, or continued—as in Norilsk—to provide the livelihood of a whole town.

Another contradiction was built into the Soviet-style apparatus: the inherent tendency of mid-level bureaucrats to parcellize their offices into self-contained bailiwicks. The central government, in the absence of a non-official press, competitive elections or price-setting markets, lacked the mechanisms to restrain its own bureaucratic subordinates, save by lashing out in periodic propaganda campaigns or relying on Secret Police reports and repression. With the death of Stalin and the ouster of Khrushchev, the Soviet nomenklatura gained their paradise. The inhuman work pace of previous regimes was over and deadly purges were no longer a threat. There

was also growing pressure from educated Soviet specialists and workers who, during the 1960s, began to coalesce into a self-conscious layer or, as some dissident ideologists called it, 'civil society'. The nomenklatura, fearful of reactivating the monster of the Secret Police, opted instead to offer more sausage and a very hypocritical dissimulation of public politics. The accumulated industrial base, with the help of petrodollars after 1973, made the death of Soviet developmentalism pretty comfortable.

Russia has paid a heavy price for the conservative repression of the reform movement of the 1960s. There was enough revolutionary impetus, after 1989, to destroy the communist state and bring to power opportunistic populists like Yeltsin; but there was far from enough to reconstitute the state structures and use them in managing the transition to capitalist markets. As a result, opportunism and greed spread like brushfire throughout the collapsing Soviet institutions. The nomenklatura rushed to organize soft landings for themselves, grabbing whatever lay close to hand: factories, mines, shops; or whole provinces and newly independent republics. In this process, the disintegrating bureaucracy was helped by a swarm of nimble fixers. The luckiest of these grabbed enough for themselves to become potentates in their own right, and came to be called the oligarchs. But in the ensuing chaos, they wrecked the country's economy and geopolitical position to such an extent that Russia, after all the sacrifices of previous generations, recoiled back towards the periphery of the capitalist world and is still grappling with the realization that, instead of the promised land of the USA, it got something more like Latin America.

Fortunately Meier, like the great literary figures he admires, is capable of containing contradictions. The book itself presents strong enough evidence against its main thesis—that, if only the Russians faced the past evils of Stalinism, their present and near future could be better. One can hardly accuse the dissident historian, Roy Medvedev, or the parents of Krichevsky—one of the three young men who fell in August 1991, fighting the reactionary coup—of such ignorance or lack of moral compass. These people clearly view Yeltsin's market and political reforms as a disaster, and yet have pinned what hopes they have to the authoritarianism of his anointed successor. Something does not add up in Meier's picture, and his work is the better for it. The picture rings true overall, its rudimentary moralizing notwithstanding. Andrew Meier is not just a Slavist who loves and knows the object of his study. He also tells us something important about the dark side of contemporary globalization. These seem to me good reasons to recommend his book.