

Putin Country: A Journey Into the Real Russia

Anne Garrels

Picador; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016

American media correspondent Anne Garrels began visiting Chelyabinsk more than twenty years ago, and centers her observations of Russian life around that city with the express purpose of being away from Moscow so she can “follow the citizens of the new Russia.” Chelyabinsk is the capital of a region that was once closed as part of Stalin’s secret nuclear weapons program. A military-industrial center located at the southern edge of the Ural mountains some 1000 miles east of Moscow, it is a now-thriving city that Garrels considers an apt representative of the new Russia.

A startling thing about Chelyabinsk plays virtually no part in Garrels’ account of the people and their lives today: to the world’s amazement, the city was struck by the fragments of the sixty-foot-wide meteor that entered the earth’s atmosphere on February 1, 2013, with a brilliant white streak. Exploding about 28 miles above the region with a blast thirty times more powerful than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, it shattered windows and television screens and sent debris flying that injured 1200 people. The story about that could make a book in itself, but Garrels has a different purpose that makes *Putin Country: A Journey Into the Real Russia* especially pertinent to those who want a first-hand look at Russia as it exists under Vladimir Putin.

Garrels was for forty years a Western correspondent in the Soviet Union and then in independent Russia. She began in 1982 as the ABC News correspondent in Moscow, but quickly became *persona non grata*, expelled for her coverage of the dissident movement. Things changed after the Soviet Union fell apart, and in 1993 Garrels became the representative of NPR (the United States’ National Public Radio) there. She was expelled again in 2012 for reasons never explained to her, but was surprised to continue to receive visas. Over the years, she has made several visits to Chelyabinsk, which she has chosen to make the focal point for her reporting in this book.

The relationship between Russia and the United States has been a hot topic since the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States. It has been in that context that we have particularly wanted to

know more about Russia today and about the Putin administration. It appeared that Garrels' book might be the best for the purpose, as "a journey into the real Russia." That expectation has certainly been met, with Garrels packing a lot of on-the-ground information into a short (and easily readable) book of just 228 pages. The information is based on her own observations and a great many personal contacts.

Although this provides an intimate feel for the place, readers will want to keep in mind that because of the very nature of this sort of reporting most of the information is based on hearsay and can't be something Garrels knows directly. At one point, for example, she writes "members of Putin's party visited from the regional capital and threatened voters that if they did not vote for the Kremlin's party, all funding would be cut off." This is based on what she was told by a local "activist." By citing its hearsay nature, we don't mean say that it is wrong — only that what it tells us should not be presumed to be definitive.

A second caveat also needs to be kept in mind. It is that, despite her many years in Russia, Garrels brings a pronouncedly ideological point of view to the book that reflects the mindset shared by virtually all members of the American mainstream media. Her thinking is fully up-to-date with the broad range of fashions that define "political correctness" in the United States. This comes up in a number of ways. If, say, she were giving a straight report on "the citizens of the new Russia," which is the express intent of her book, the main thing to tell us about homosexuality would be that Russian attitudes are "overwhelmingly negative toward the LGBT community." That would pretty much say it, and there would be no call for an entire chapter [albeit a short one] on "The Gay Life," for her disparaging references to "homophobia," and for her "wish" that there were a more "vibrant" homosexual presence. All of the latter tells us more about Garrels' attitudes than it does about the Russian people. It is interesting that she sees the Cold War as having been about Moscow's "former dreams of empire" rather than about the expansion of Communist ideology to Asia, Africa and Latin America — indeed, to wherever penetration could be made.¹ And just as "anti-anti-Communism" was a standard passion years ago, now there is an

¹ There are two schools of thought that prefer to downplay the worldwide 70-year program of expansionist Marxist-Leninist ideology. One is that of the "foreign policy realists," for whom the nation-state is the focus of analysis. To this very prominent school of thought, the Cold War was about *Soviet*, not Communist, expansionism. The other school is the Left itself, which at one time was exhilarated by Communism and has at all times been defensive toward it.

“anti-anti-Islamism” that tends to see only peaceful Muslims and takes a suspicious view of most efforts to combat radical Islamism. Note her perspective as she writes of “the government’s heavy-handed approach [that] may be creating the very extremism it is trying to curb.”

This adherence to politically correct viewpoints takes an odd turn when it comes to Garrels’ comments about Russian actions in Ukraine and the Crimea. At one point, she shows a clear understanding of the situation in both places. She knows that “the U.S.-backed Ukrainian opposition overthrew the country’s pro-Russian president” and that “the Ukrainian parliament passed a law that would rescind the Russian language’s official status” [an act that was vetoed]. About the Crimea, she says it is “a historically Russian peninsula that had been transferred to Ukraine in 1954.” Its population, she says, is “overwhelmingly Russian.” She quotes a Russian who once considered himself a part of Putin’s “opposition” to the effect that “Ukraine is of ‘existential importance’ to Russia.” The awareness of these things doesn’t keep her, however, from expressing judgments that put her in line with American neoconservatives’ condemnation of Putin’s actions. She speaks of “Putin’s adventures in eastern Ukraine” and of his “policies of confrontation and isolation,” reversing cause-and-effect to make him the initiating party. Her choice to be “politically correct” on something she understands so well puts us on notice to question the objectivity of her reporting.

These caveats are important, but to mention them is not to suggest that the book lacks value. *Putin Country: A Journey Into the Real Russia* has much to tell us. Here is a sample of what Garrels reports:

Immediate aftermath of the break-up of the Soviet Union. Garrels describes a nightmare after the collapse in 1991. Many factories were abandoned and stripped. Rural Russia was in chaos, and “as farms fell apart, the land was either stolen by crafty managers or redivided among the ill-prepared workers,” who had “no infrastructure to back them.” In the absence of credit and mortgages, there was no real estate market. The Russian military “all but collapsed”; there was rampant inflation; and the Gross Domestic Product fell by a third. Industry was sold off for virtually nothing in “corrupt auctions,” and the new owners “sucked them dry and took their profits out of the country.” In 1998, Russia defaulted on its foreign loans. Seeing a take-over by an oligarchy, Russians had a bad taste in their mouths about “Yeltsin and his Western advisers” by the time he resigned in 1999. Garrels says “foreigners were ultimately blamed” for the corruption, and that Russians generally thought the

West was trying to undermine, rather than help, the country.

Russia today: the economy. We will see that Garrels offsets the positives with many negatives, but these occur simultaneously with what she describes as a remarkably revitalized economy. “The Russian economy has grown nearly tenfold under Putin [who replaced Yeltsin], creating a consumer boom and an emerging middle class.” In Chelyabinsk, young people sport designer jeans and listen to British and American rock music. Foreign-made smartphones are “ubiquitous.” There are fashionable clubs, elegant shops and restaurants, both domestic and international clothing chains, many decent hotels and travel agencies. The roads are improved; the skyline is “cluttered with cranes” for new construction; the city has a new park and hockey rink; supermarkets are well stocked. The bottom line, Garrels says, is that “most people live much better” than under Yeltsin or the Soviet Union.

Things are much improved, but not quite as idyllic as this makes it sound. For example, although it is true there is a great deal of new construction and that it is of considerably higher quality than before, there is still a “housing crisis,” with extreme family over-crowding. Garrels tells of a family of eight sharing three small rooms in a village a few miles from the city in 2012 (but it’s noteworthy that she adds that “the village was alive with the hum of home improvement”). As to industry, she mentions that the country still counts too much on revenue from oil and gas, and says there is a continuing “legacy of huge Soviet plants that have failed to modernize.” The “steel and mining giant” in Chelyabinsk is “in serious trouble.” Looking ahead, there are “plans to build hundreds of nuclear reactors for domestic use and export.”

A flight of owners of small and medium-sized businesses from Russia has caused a “brain drain.” After several years of decline, the population has risen only a little. Putin has even called a holiday “to give couples time off to make babies” and has put several programs in place (such as “maternity leave [that] is now among the most generous in the world”) in an effort to increase the birthrate. To help meet this demographic slide, until a recent tightening the government wanted more immigrants from the countries that used to be part of the Soviet Union.

Agriculture. The picture in rural Russia is mixed. Garrels reports that young people have long been leaving the villages to seek jobs and excitement in the cities. Partly denuded of their younger inhabitants, the more distant villages look very much as they did a century ago. The collective farms from the Communist era have fallen into ruins, and

now “one-third of the country’s arable land lies fallow.”² Just the same, Russia is able to export grain. The government subsidizes agriculture, especially for domestic consumption. Garrels says Western economic sanctions are seen in a favorable light as a spur to Russian farming. She mentions there is a shortage of farm workers because young Russians [like Americans] “don’t want to work for the low wages and long hours.” She doesn’t mention it, but we surmise the sanctions and lack of workers will likely lead to increasing automation, with machines taking the place of low-pay labor.

Safety net. Putin, she says, has made “an acceptable safety net” a “key feature” of his administration. This consists of pension, family and social welfare programs.

Health care. While the safety net may be ample, the health care system is not. Garrels says it has gotten better during the past twenty years, but that it “is indeed a mess,” with “poor management, cronyism, lack of strategic thinking, [and] ever-growing corruption.” Medical professionals, including doctors, work in “intolerable” conditions and are poorly paid. The result doesn’t speak well for “socialized medicine.” To mitigate things somewhat, the government now allows up to 15 percent of patients to pay for medical service, and Garrels says this leads to better care for them.

The human quality. What Garrels tells us about the Russian people isn’t at all favorable. She mentions that American teachers in Chelyabinsk have run into rampant cheating, and students who are “utterly apathetic.” The universities are producing journalism majors who for the most part are like those in the former Soviet Union: careerists who “will kow-tow to whoever will pay them.”³ Given her own predilections, Garrels would like to see some social activism, but a friend tells her the

²The movement of large masses of people from rural to urban has been going on since the advent of the Industrial Revolution, and has in some cases had revolutionary consequences. It was a major phenomenon in Russia before the Russian Revolution and in Iran before the fall of the Shah. Today, hundreds of millions of Chinese are flooding into China’s coastal cities; and, of course, we know that in the United States only a minute fraction of the population is occupied on the land even though at one time historically the country was almost entirely agricultural.

³The similarity of some of this to the situation in the United States would seem too obvious to need mention. We can’t help but think of how economist Paul Craig Roberts, in his own outrageously outspoken way, describes many American journalists as “press-titutes.” If, say, the anchor people on the local television channels ever have a thought that is not in agreement with what’s “politically correct,” they never betray it, at least in this reviewer’s experience.

people in Chelyabinsk “remain utterly passive.”

Garrels describes a damaging prevalence of alcohol, but, as with so much else, indicates the situation is improving. “Good men” are hard for women to find “given the high rates of alcoholism.” The divorce rate is the world’s highest, with alcoholism “the bane of Russian family life.” Just the same [though it seems faint praise], within the past decade “Russians are on average living a little longer, drinking themselves to death less frequently, killing themselves less often.”

Corruption. Pay-offs seem to be a way of life at all levels. Garrels says “for now, most everyone seems apathetic, cowed, or bought.” Doctors are bribed for opinions leading to exemption from military service; judges are manipulated; journalism is “sleazy and bought.” Businesses must often make payoffs to the regional government. The general manager of one plant told her “the scale of corruption is enormous.” Nobody will implicate anyone else, since they all “have the goods on one another.” When in 2012 Putin clamped down on graft, the city manager of almost every town in the Chelyabinsk’s region was arrested. One senses, though, from what Garrels says, that the crackdown hasn’t changed much.

We might wish Garrels would think critically about what constitutes “corruption” in such a setting. Russia’s ubiquitous corruption seems a vast network of irregular compensation, some of it filling in for the lack of a more adequate regularized system. When we tip a parking valet or a waitress, we don’t call it a “payoff,” so some discriminating insight is called for. Further, it’s worth considering that in a setting where “everyone’s doing it,” someone who doesn’t is allowing himself to be a victim because of his scruples. It’s a more complicated human situation than it would appear.

Religion. After many years of forced obsequiousness under the Soviet Union, the Russian Orthodox Church is making a comeback. “Everywhere churches are being restored or built.” Without seeming to intend any reflection on the Church itself, Garrels tells how the Russian people are “ever-superstitious,” and mentions astrology and psychics. [Anyone who has studied the life of Rasputin knows how important superstition was to Tsar Nicholas and especially to Empress Alexandra, who was desperate for Rasputin’s faith healing to alleviate their son’s hemophilia.]

Islam is highly significant on the Russian periphery. The Chechen rebellion appeared to be defeated before Putin took office in 2000, but

it fired back up, leading Putin to crush it and “level the capital.” Without much sympathy for the Russian conundrum, Garrels says a “puppet government” was installed that adopted its “own version of Muslim law.” She says things remain unresolved, with “the rebel leadership underground” and Islamist insurgencies growing in the Muslim republics to Russia’s south. A result is that the Putin government keeps an eye on Islamic activity, so that when Muslims gather in Chelyabinsk “it’s widely understood that undercover cops are somewhere in the crowd.”

Feminism. Garrels surmises that a bad experience with ostensible feminism in the Soviet Union explains why Russian women spurn feminism now. “Utter the word ‘feminism’ and the immediate reaction is one of disgust.” As with the rejection of homosexuality, this shows that in some major ways the Russian people are insulated from the evolving attitudes of the West’s opinion elite.

The Soviet legacy. Even though almost every Russian family lost loved ones to the Gulag or the purges, there seems little residual bitter memory.⁴ A large statue of Lenin stands in Chelyabinsk’s parade ground. The official emphasis favors patriotism: “Russians are now being told to ignore the mass killings and concentrate on Stalin’s development of the country and victory in World War II.”

Vladimir Putin. From her many contacts, Garrels has first-hand knowledge of the strong support Putin enjoys. She says Chelyabinsk is “Putin country” and becoming more so, and generalizes that this is so for the Russian people in general. When she reports his approval rating as having risen above 80 percent after his actions in Ukraine and the Crimea, she tells us something that is probably true but that necessarily can’t be from her direct knowledge. It is worth thinking in these terms, because virtually everything else she writes about Putin and his admin-

⁴ The same lack of angry remembrance prevails in China, where Mao continues to be venerated even though he presided over the murder of millions. A strange disconnect in mass psychology is evident when we consider that today, more than seventy years after the end of World War II, there are still “Holocaust survivors” who experience great emotional pain. The disconnect is to be seen not just in how the respective populations react, but in how the world remembers some things so vividly while treating others as inconsequential.

We must not forget that “true believers” have found it easy to rationalize the mass killing of political enemies. Two “Yeltsin scholars” attending an American university a few years ago spent a few days at this reviewer’s home. In a discussion with one of them late into the night, he was asked “what are your thoughts about Stalin’s murdering of millions?” The young man’s answer: “They deserved to die. They were enemies of the state.”

istration necessarily has to be from second-hand sources. It is through these that we learn that Putin “used law enforcement to destroy his rivals,” and created “pliant, fake opposition parties.” The elections have been “rigged” and there was “massive fraud in the 2011 parliamentary elections.” Police use fake bomb threats as a ruse to break up opposition meetings. She speaks of Putin’s “coterie of corrupt oligarchs.” Interestingly, Russians’ use of the Internet is “relatively unfettered,” with information freely available through “a huge community of bloggers.”

To what degree *Putin Country: A Journey Into the Real Russia* adequately describes Russia today is something each reader will have to judge. Garrels’ experience and credentials testify loudly in its favor, while her evident predilections suggest her account tells us as much about her, and the Western opinion she reflects, as it does about Russia. As is true with all reviews, the book contains much more than we have been able to cover. It’s on an important subject, and we recommend it to the discriminating reader.

Dwight D. Murphey

Einstein: His Life and Universe

Walter Isaacson

Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2007

(Basis for *Genius*, the ten-part National Geographic series, 2017,
Starring Geoffrey Rush)

When Walter Isaacson wrote this book and *National Geographic* did the ten-part series based on it that began its run in April 2017, they were wise not to attempt an exhaustive study of contemporary physics. To do that would have lost readers in material far beyond most people’s grasp (including this reviewer’s). *Einstein: His Life and Universe* serves its readers well by settling for something far different than a textbook. What it does do is to provide a lucid window into the advanced theories of the past century, while necessarily leaving readers with as many questions as it answers. As to the physics, it is a highly intelligent introduction to such things as the law of the photoelectric effect (for which, oddly enough, Einstein won his only Nobel Prize), the Special and General Theories of Relativity, the curvature of “spacetime,” the mysteries of Quantum Theory, and much else. For the educated lay-

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