

[Неприкосновенный Запас, №. 2 \(4\), 1999](#)

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**WITHOUT CLEOPATRA  
(MOSCOW IN THE SUMMER OF 1992)**

Gregory Freidin

Moscow

When you arrive in Moscow after a few months' absence, it is as though you have arrived in a different country. Oh yes, the filth is the same and so is the desolate, devastated look of the grand metropolis. Moscow is a perfect setting for the final episodes of Wells's *War of the Worlds*. But that has been true for years. It is the spirit of the place that has changed -- radically, perhaps, irrevocably. The old soul has been taken out of Moscow; what replaced it does not yet have a name. Last August, before and after the putsch, there was a lot of the old soul left. None is to be had now. Everything is strictly *biznis*, even if everything is a single bottle of Pepsi that a *babushka*, bent over with age, is hawking on the Tverskaia while the more fortunate file in and out of a crowded food emporium. Some of the more colorful spots, the Arbat for one, where the gnarly Muscovites used to get a feel for freedom might be like, are now so sordid and miserable that you wonder if Calcutta is now Moscow's sister city. Near the Prague restaurant, the pride of the turn-of-the-century bourgeois Moscow (and still looking good) where the poets Blok and Bely once tried to settle their love score, a ten-year-old boy is stretched on the sidewalk next to the underpass. He is asleep, or delirious. His trouser leg is rolled up to expose a horrible sore -- for all the world to see, to feel pity, and to give alms. And all the world, its entire sweating, shoving and heaving mass that is being pumped through the Arbat Square, is stepping over the boy-invalid while counting, counting, counting the ever-expanding wads of the increasingly worthless cash. Capitalism? Hyper inflation? Anxiety about the future? They now electrify this city, bathed in the thick, almost liquid air of Moscow's midsummer heat.

Make your way to the Kremlin's Alexander Gardens where the perennial snaking crowd of provincial visitors used to crawl patiently towards old-fashioned Lenin's avant garde tomb. The crowd is still there but the queue is facing in the opposite direction: a revival rally sponsored by a Korean fundamentalist sect flying a giant sausage shaped balloon over one of Borovitsky Gate. The Lenin Museum nearby rented its space to an exhibition of Sots-Art, and the parodic high-camp art of Komar and Melamid blends seamlessly with the sacred relics of the collapsed communist orthodoxy. But more is less when it comes to irony. In elephantine doses -- the Sots-Art mockery of Leninism in Lenin's holy shrine -- irony becomes intolerable. I flee the outsized joke, and as I find myself once again in the sweltering, crowded heat outside, I breathe a sigh of relief, minus relief.

Another underpass. In the neon darkness of the pedestrian passageway that running like a labyrinth under the Manege Square, more hands are humbly outstretched, more bodies huddling in the grimy crevasses away from the foot traffic of the shuffling, pulsating crowd. But turn the corner, and a sudden burst of live notes from a Vivaldi concerto will strike you like a flash of heavenly light tearing apart the dank near-darkness of the underpass hell. The players are a trio of angelic-looking, virginal twenty-year olds who must have been borrowed for the occasion from the ceiling frescoes of the Vatican or Florentine Palazzo Pitti. Everyone is struck by the contrast. The pedestrian mass loses speed as it approaches the trio. A few little eddies of men and women form here and there. People step away from the main current, pause for a moment to take in the music, sigh, shake their heads in disbelief, and in a magnanimous farewell cast a modest offering on the unsteady altar of civilization before the peristalses of the moving crowd sucks them back into the infernal passageway.

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On a midsummer day in Moscow, in a nice old-fashioned building next to the city's famous masterpiece-filled Fine Arts Museum, the Institute of Philosophy of Russia's Academy of Sciences, was holding a round-table discussion for Russian and American scholars. The subject was "Moscow, the Capital of the World." As expected, the large room, designated for such occasions, was packed to capacity, but in other respects, things went a little differently, as they do in today's Russia. The participating pundits were seated along narrow tables arranged in an enormous rectangle, with some thirty or forty feet of empty space separating opposite sides. The official greeting was offered by the Deputy Director of the Institute. This bookish, bespectacled man in his sixties, dressed in an awkward brown suit with a brown shirt and a brown tie to match, tried to be polite and speak to the point. He would have succeeded, were it not for the distant and strangely disembodied delivery which made his greeting sound more like an invitation to a funeral than a feast of the mind that the assembled brains were about to enjoy.

"A *necro* welcome," my neighbor whispered into my ear, using the new qualifier made fashionable by the avant garde crowd of Moscow and St. Petersburg whose tended to see Soviet culture as an elaborate, humorless death cult.

The deputy Director was flanked on both sides by younger philosophers, men in their late thirties or early forties. They sat motionless and relaxed, like a pair of seasoned prize fighters, mindful of exerting precious energy on the eve of an important match. Only the faintest of smiles flitted across their passionless faces and lingered just a tad longer than was required for an observer to appreciate the extent of their patronizing tolerance of the older and woefully old-fashioned don.

The next philosopher to take the floor wore shirt sleeves. An owlish, slightly pudgy man of about forty with a full head of curly brown hair, he spoke non-stop for forty five minutes. For these long forty five minutes, he shared with the increasingly restless crowd his admiration for Jacques Derrida's unpublished critique -- occasioned by the Derrida's visit to Moscow in 1989 -- of travel diaries of the earlier notable travelers to the USSR. It was the title of that unpublished essay of the French philosopher that gave the name to the round-table discussion that was so slow to commence. And commence it never did.

A few exasperated listeners did question the Derrida disciple about the relevance of his thought for understanding present-day Russia. To no avail. Like paper airplanes, their questions hesitated in midair, but unaided by a response, swooped down and disappeared without making a noise. Now silence descended on the assembled pundits, the deep silence of embarrassment experienced by the people who are never at a loss for words. In vain did the co-chairmen of the round table try to goad their colleagues into a conversation. Nobody took the bait. A poisonous deconstructionist cloud enveloped the audience, bringing with it an awareness that all possible generalities regarding modern Russia had already been said, all the *bon mots* recorded for posterity, amplified in the media, broadcast, assimilated, and rendered irrelevant by the historically unprecedented confusion of recent years. No one could be certain of being understood, of belonging to a community of shared knowledge or belief, indeed it was not even clear that such a thing as a community could exist, beyond an assembly of a few narrow specialists.

Once again it was Communism to blame, this time not by its overweening presence, but its still mysterious sudden disappearance. Communism was gone, and, with it, the common enemy, the common buffoon and oppressor that had until recently bonded the intelligentsia into a community of thinkers. The Communist state, with all of its concentration and mystery of unrestrained might, was, for the intelligentsia, the common object of desire. Like the legendary Cleopatra with her lovers, communism promised everyone who dared to challenge it the night of unearthly delight and ... the executioner's block in the morning. All their life, Moscow's free thinkers had been queuing up in the antechamber of the Communist Cleopatra, each awaiting his turn to possess, if ever so briefly, absolute power's irresistible charm. And now, still in the antechamber, still in shock from her sudden passing, they were eyeing each other uneasily, throats parched and minds dried up.

At last, the silence was broken by a feisty, wiry man in his late sixties who shot up from his seat and speaking in a rapid-fire manner of one who feared being cut short before he could finish, informed the assembly that Moscow ranked first among the world capitals in consumption of animal protein. Animal protein? Yes, animal protein. His voice rising to an indignant pitch, he all of a sudden stopped and resumed a sitting position by slamming his body down. A few nervous chuckles was all he could harvest. And yet another wave of silence slowly rolled over the audience. Now an American academic of Russian origin took the floor.

"Russian studies in America," he began haltingly, "originated in the cold war, had drawn sustenance from it, and, now that the cold is over, Russian studies are bound to peter out."

He paused, let silence fill the room and then, in a piteous screeching tone, asked a question: "What do you think, should I, perhaps, start looking for another job?"

The question was addressed to no one in particular, and nobody stirred in response. Unanswered, the query lingered in the air like the smile of the Cheshire Cat before being swallowed by silence. The audience, it seemed, mostly the Institute's employees, were suddenly reminded of a new round of staff reduction that had been announced earlier that week.

Another voice asked to be recognized. A young Russian man, blue-eyed, with a curly blond beard, and wearing a threadbare T-shirt that retained patches of its original

white stood up. "I am a philosophy major at the Moscow State University," he introduced himself, blushing deeply, his voice choked from embarrassment. He steadied himself and went on to cite an obscure American ego psychologist whose recent contribution he had studied in a university seminar. "To be speaking about the current state of affairs in Russia -- in the presence of American specialists -- is like..." He paused to swallow, "...Like copulating in front of a peep hole when you know that someone is crouching behind it with a camera, tape recorder, and a notepad." The audience gasped, but in a moment burst into laughter and applause. The young wit blushed an even deeper shade of crimson. The round table was over.

What a relief it was to walk outside. The Cleopatra of communism was dead. Her former *amanti* among the Russian intelligentsia and their American colleagues were dispersing, taking the measure of what was now a much smaller, perhaps, more hopeful, but a decidedly disenchanted world.

July-September 1992

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