

Erofeev: in a Cage Where Anything Goes

Viktor Erofeev is among Russia's most important contemporary authors, and one of its most vividly sarcastic. ● He sees Putin-era Russia as operating under a central guiding principle:

Citizens are free to do whatever they wish in their private lives, so long as they don't rain on the regime's parade. ● As for murdered journalists, who's really paying attention? ●

by **Alessandra Garusi**

What happens to Russia if its sun sets? What to do with such a great rotting corpse? Scatter over lime over its remains?" Versatile writer, the son of a diplomat stationed in Paris at the time of Stalin, Viktor Erofeev is sarcastic and crude when it comes to speaking of his homeland. When he writing of Russian life he spare readers neither harness of language nor richness of color. Though was expelled from the Union of Soviet writers in 1979 because of his political persuasions and his involvement in the independent al-

manac "Metropol"; though his prose was banned for nearly a decade, the old days are just that. Today he's stopped in the street by well-to-do strangers who just want him to know they know who he is. "I saw you on 'Kultura' the other night (a TV channel where moderates a program called 'Apokrif)," says one. "You were as biting as ever." His books are also a must. They include "Russian Beauty," "The Encyclopedia of the Russian Soul, and the autobiographical novel "Good Stalin." It's is as if Erofeev sought to put mirror in front of Russian society in an effort to say, "Watch out, people. A mirror doesn't lie." While visiting the Mantua Literature Festival, Erofeev chatted with east.

Reading your novels, one gets the impression that you're trying wake up the Russian population by applying electroshock therapy. Is that the idea?

It's hard for me to say just why I do it. I don't write for readers. I write books that I feel in my mind's eye. I don't worry about the consequences. Mine is not a political message. These books literally come to me; they're books

I feel "must" write. There's really nothing metaphysical or mystical about it.

Can you give me an example?

When "Russian Beauty" came out (1990), the book was reviewed 200 times and got 200 bad reviews. The story of Irina Vladimirovna, who to me was a true genius of beauty and love, was described as "pure pornography." The tough and uncompromisingly sexual language was probably ahead of its time. But it was my first novel. I took a real beating as a result of all that critical rejection. But then, unexpectedly, it became a best-selling book in Holland. So the publisher sent there to promote it. After a debate about the book in a small Dutch town, a young woman came up to me and said, "Mr. Erofeev, though I liked your book I still have one question: Why there are no sex scenes?" That girl saved me. It hit me that cultural differences can be so vast as to make a book sound like pornography in one society but like its exact opposite elsewhere. It all depends.

Some say I'm an outrageous writer, to which I reply: 'I'm the one inventing the scandals.' Russian society isn't evolved enough to understand my books as literary texts. This means that I've shut down the discussion with my readers. I don't believe you can stir people if they don't want to wake up from a deep sleep. But if someone does wake up, I'm thrilled.

But the era of the bad reviews was the nineties. These days, when I travel through Russia, even middle-aged women come up just to thank me. Some tell me they've given "Russian Beauty" to male friends, and told them, "If you don't like it, our friendship ends here..." (Laughs out loud.) This for me is a step forward: The book has gone from being considered junk pornography to a litmus test about friendship and whether you can trust someone. But it took me 20 years to change the situation... Did I wake Russian women? Or did the sun wake them up? Did I play a role? I don't know.

What do you think of Russia's decision to allow a trimmed-down version of "The Gulag Archipelago" into schools?

It makes coherent sense. The regime opposes commu-

Writer Victor Erofeev was once on Russia's wrong side for supporting dissident. Now, he lives and works in his native Moscow.



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nism. It's trying to rehabilitate Stalin, but as an imperialist, not a Communist. "The Gulag Archipelago," if you analyze it in detail, destroys communism's values. As a result I can't see much that's strange in the ministry of education decision to include the book. I agree with it. The only way you can develop as a nation is to acknowledge past mistakes. Moreover, it's a great book. I love it. My fear is that the decision is just a formality. But that I mean some students might find it hard to understand it. The risk in that, over time, is that rather than helping with an objective analysis of history, the book produces a rejection of it.

Despite all this I still think the decision represents a kind of major personal progress and represents a small historical advance. I still recall when I read the book it for the first time at my cousin's house in Warsaw. For the Soviets, in those days, it was like an Atom Bomb. So much so that I was scared to cross the border with the book my pocket.

You've studied and lived in Paris for a long time, but you remain deeply tied to Moscow, a Muscovite. What does Russia not understand about the West, and vice versa?

The conflict between the West and Russia isn't new. It's always existed. The difference involves metaphysical values. And such values have disappeared in the West. For example, we posit goodness as an alternative to capitalism and competition: We perceive ourselves as

a "modest" and "religious" people (he laughs sarcastically), which of course have no connection to reality. Italians seem to us a personification of the devil. This may all seem very primitive, but when it comes to the view from Russian villages – and certainly not from the Moscow city center – that's what it's about. Since you reject the notion of being saved, you'll be damned forever. It makes sense that living in total poverty life's only purpose is trying to feel close to God.

Even if Russians constantly "We're the best" to outsiders, they're more frank in closed company. I was once invited by a group of intellectuals to visit the city of Vladimir, which is about 200 kilometers east of Moscow.

Before the conference began a group of these intellectuals came up to me and more or less said: "This is the shittiest city in the world." Five or six glasses of vodka changed their tune. Now it was "Why not stay here? It's a paradise on earth..." After a round of speeches and some more vodkas – by then it was around 5 a.m. – they came back around again: It was in fact the shitty city in the world.

No one really knows where the truth lies in Russia, whether it comes from those who are sober, from those who've had five or six glasses of vodka, or a lot more. There's just no way to rationalize it. What's for sure is that people who lack support and context are prone to making fantasies. And that's exceedingly dangerous.



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ABOVE The lifeless body of Stanislav Markelov, a human rights lawyer and investigative journalist who was shot dead in Moscow on Jan. 19, 2009.

LEFT Russian President Vladimir Putin, now prime minister, met with the late Nobel Prize-winning author Alexander Solzhenitsyn in 2007. Solzhenitsyn's "The Gulag Archipelago" will soon be taught in national schools.

Anna Politkovskaya, Natalia Estemirova, Stanislav Markelov, Anastasia Baburova, the list goes on... Many journalists, lawyers and representatives of nongovernmental organizations have lost their lives as a result of disdaining Russian policy in Chechnya. What does this mean for Russian society?

It doesn't mean hardly anything. They were assassinations conducted in a vacuum. And there's a long list of victims and detainees. On that list is a lawyer who, along with other lawyers, defended Mikhail Khodorkovsky (editor's note: the oil tycoon arrested in 2003). Among other things she's pregnant – and still in prison. In an effort to resolve the situation, which was more of a humanitarian effort than a political one, 80 writers, myself included, sent a letter to the head of state. The result? We were all accused of being enemies of the Russian people.

While Khodorkovsky imprisonment had huge domestic and international repercussions, there were many arrests connected to the case that went ahead amid general indifference. That lawyer Stanislav Markelov and Anastasia Baburova, a young journalist, were slain on

CENTER Moscow residents place flowers where Markelov and 25-year-old journalist Anastasia Baburova were killed.

BELOW Members of 'Reporter sans Frontieres' demonstrate in Berlin on behalf of freedom of the press in Russia.

They carry images of slain reporter Anna Politkovskaya, a critic of Russia's Chechnya policy, as well as Baburova and Markelov.



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Prechistenka street in the center of town, and just a few steps from the Cathedral of Christ the Savior – of course no one saw anything – gives you an idea of the climate in Moscow these days. I should point out that none of the dead was a radical.

On the contrary, these were “ordinary” people who were trying to do their jobs in what they hoped was a “normal” state that would tolerate “moderate” opposition. But the lukewarm reaction to their deaths among common people suggests that Russian society, at least for now, isn’t ready to take on the increasingly insane wave of nationalism. I’m afraid the bloodstain is destined to widen.

Where can change come from?

First, a premise: change in pre-Communist Russia came almost always from the tsar, because at that time society as we know it now virtually didn’t exist. These days there’s a small but significant difference. There’s a kind of clandestine pact between the Kremlin and society: If you’re loyal to the Kremlin, you, as a private individual, are free to do just about anything.

An example: Near my house there’s a building that’s occupied by prostitutes. Every night you hear all kinds of

noises: bottles being uncorked and so on. In front of this building, there’s another one that houses a community of monks who spend their time with rites, prayer and work. The existence of two diametrically opposite realities is completely ignored.

On the private level, the Russian situation is very good. We’ve never known such freedom, and this accounts for Putin’s popularity. You can become a Buddhist, a Muslim, organize an orgy at home – everything is possible. It’s a bit like the “neighborly democracy” that characterized Spain under Franco in the 1950s and 60s. Russians now live a similar situation. That may seem too little for Europeans, but for us instead it’s a breakthrough. It’s a small sign of resistance, maybe not political, maybe not social. It’s like that fact that you don’t piss in the doorways of houses anymore because there are because there are toilets... It gives us courage; it’s a start.

Do you have a dream?

Yes. To write a few more books.

Do you think of leaving the country?

No. If the Russians don’t leave me, I’m not leaving Russia. (Laughs out loud). ●