Back to article page

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The Operatic Theory of History

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Rebirth of a Nation: An Anatomy of Russia by John Lloyd
Joseph, 478 pp, £20.00, January 1998, ISBN 0 7181 3862 7

Resurrection: The Struggle for a New Russia by David Remnick
Picador, 412 pp, £20.00, October 1998, ISBN 0 330 36916 4

The current crisis in Russia and the near-unanimous pessimism it has generated about the country's prospects make this an unfortunate time to be reviewing two books with titles as upbeat as *Rebirth of a Nation* and *Resurrection*. Curiously, though, neither book has dated as much as one might have expected since the events of last August – which is to say that the crisis has told us little we did not know, at least in outline, before.

Crises that evolve rapidly can easily steal the headlines from those that develop over years. In Russia, one of the most remarkable, though least remarked, developments in the last decade has been a collapse in the birth rate, fertility having almost halved in nine years, falling from 2.2 births per woman in 1987 to 1.3 in 1996. A demographer somewhere may prove me wrong, but I believe this to be the fastest collapse in peacetime fertility in recorded history (less rapid, but still dramatic falls have been taking place in other states of the former Soviet Union). John Lloyd intends no irony in his title, but his book covers a time when Russians have abandoned birth in a big way. A new Russia may be in the process of being born, but new Russians are not.

Far more serious than the refusal to reproduce is the collapse in male life expectancy, which, at around 57 years, is at the level of sub-Saharan Africa; the 14-year gap between men and women is now the largest in the world. Demographic changes as dramatic as these are a challenge to any single author hoping to explain the turbulent character of the country's transition from Communism to God knows what. In most countries in most times, average fertility changes only slowly, since it is the aggregate of millions of individual, idiosyncratic and unco-ordinated decisions. The extraordinary movement of these statistical aggregates in Russia alerts us to many millions of personal upheavals running right through society. Many historical revolutions, although momentous events for those who live in the capital city or get caught up in ensuing wars, have been unremarkable for the rest, who have just got on with their lives. I recall discovering, in a bundle belonging to my wife's family in the Corrèze in Central France, a letter dated July 1789 which talked of the weather, the forthcoming harvest

and various family illnesses, and never once mentioned events far away in Paris. In Gerhardie's novel *Futility*, the Revolution of 1917 (which he had witnessed) is merely a surreal and melancholy backdrop to domestic and social events played out according to an idiosyncratic and wholly unrevolutionary logic.

Unlike the events of 1917, the Russian revolution of the Nineties has not required a civil war to bring home its effects immediately to the entire population. That population is much more urbanised than it was in 1917, and most economic activity is heavily industrialised, even when it takes place on the land. Many Russian firms have complex links with suppliers and customers that extend over long distances and have proved extremely vulnerable to disruption. Demand for the products of most such firms has collapsed, and even when they do manage to sell their output it is a whole new challenge to make sure they are paid. The Government's method of controlling expenditure in order to fight inflation has not been to make fewer promises to special interest groups, but to make many of the same promises and then to decline to pay the bills of those who are in the weakest position to complain. Unemployment has risen surprisingly little given the scale of the economic collapse, but when many of the employed are not being paid the observation is somewhat metaphysical. Around half of Russian families, according to a recent survey, depend for a substantial fraction of their food requirements on what they can grow themselves. There can be very few families in the country who have not seen their lives overturned by the changes of recent years.

It would be hard for any one book to do justice to the scale of this upheaval, and neither of these two really tries to do so. Although less stylishly written. *Rebirth of a Nation* is much the larger in scope. Nevertheless, it recounts a largely metropolitan drama, with a cast of energetic, nimble, ambitious people whose actions seem unpredictable as they occur but almost inevitable with hindsight. It is a journalist's book in the best sense of that term, drawing on a richly-stocked diary of contacts, full of paradoxes and provocative thumbnail sketches, unsparing in its judgments while remarkably affectionate in its portraits. Lloyd conveys an exhilarating combination of social contingency (individuals matter and events would have been radically different with different people in positions of power and influence) and psychological determinism (it is hard to see how these individuals, being who they were, could have done otherwise than they did). At times the narrative comes uncomfortably close to opera: Tsar Boris, who has come to power heroically atop a tank in defence of the common people, finds himself surrounded by courtly intrigue and tragically succumbs to vanity, vodka and a sense of his own invincibility; from time to time, a chorus of workers and peasants laments. It shares with the operatic theory of history a capacity to make endlessly interesting the manipulations and compromises of a confused struggle for political and economic power.

This indeed is primarily a book about a few hundred key figures in the shaping of modern Russia. 'The masses,' writes Lloyd, 'did not participate in the convulsions of the new Russia, except as the object of them.' I suppose it all depends what you mean by 'participate'. When you have not been paid for many months, it must take extraordinary ingenuity and courage just to survive. And the life-expectancy statistics are a reminder of how many have not. With

the exception of a couple of brief portraits in Chapter 21, the drama of those who have survived, and the desperate strategies they had to employ to do so, are largely absent.

Lloyd shows no interest in the demographic collapse. Or rather, he mentions it – without showing any curiosity as to its causes – in one sentence that contains a startling, even surrealistic error. 'Birth rates began to fall, until by the Nineties they had turned negative.' (Huh?) Unfortunately, such errors are not rare, ranging from the obviously typographical to more troubling signs of haste. Lloyd writes of the invasion of Chechnya that Yeltsin 'could certainly have avoided it, though only by exerting a slow, patient squeeze on the Chechen leadership of which his military was not capable'. Somewhere in that sentence a tortured philosophical thesis about possibility is struggling to escape; more worryingly, the chapter on the Chechen war later in the book makes no clearer what Lloyd takes Yeltsin's options realistically to have been.

David Remnick's book is at its best on the Chechen conflict, though not because it tries to answer the hard questions. It more or less takes for granted that the invasion was both a folly and a crime, and concentrates on bringing home its human cost. The chapter in question is well and movingly written and would serve as a fitting rebuke to anyone inclined to believe that the bad conscience of statecraft can be simply assuaged by talk of omelettes and eggs. Children were dismembered in their thousands because politicians and generals were too tired, too drunk or too sick to think clearly.

Other parts of Remnick's book are elegant, vivid and often funny: the city of Moscow comes particularly alive. But the elegance of the prose may also be part of the problem. A reviewer in the *Financial Times* has commented on the fact that the dust-jacket misleadingly describes as 'the definitive account of one of history's great turning points' what is really a collection of highly impressionistic essays. Remnick undertakes very little analysis of any kind: the book draws almost entirely on his own interviews, and even on the rare occasions when it cites other studies, makes almost no use of their insights.

It also ignores some of the central questions arising from its own avowed theme ('the struggle for the definition of the new Russian state'), such as the extent to which the state is being reshaped by a gradual ebbing of power to the regions. It cites just two statistics in the course of four hundred pages. The trouble is that Remnick is continually tugging at our sleeve to remind us that he was there in person: 'Gorbachev told me'; 'Zhirinovsky once told me'; 'Back in the kitchen, Solzhenitsyn himself reminded me.' In itself this is no more than mildly irritating, but since the writer principally interviews other writers, politicians and the occasional gangster the result is sometimes to substitute elegant wording for thought. 'As a personality, Chernomyrdin was Gaidar's opposite: an industrialist where Gaidar was a theoretician.' Only someone who disdains to talk to them could think industrialists form a personality type. Remnick quotes, apparently admiringly, someone who describes Solzhenitsyn as having 'a real conviction, a poet's knowledge. He sees. The man sees.' It must be wonderful to be a poet; think what you save on research.

Where the two books tackle similar subjects, it is evident that Lloyd has worked harder and

thought more deeply. This is apparent even in character portraits: where Lloyd makes much of Yeltsin's decline, Remnick's Yeltsin is painted as a drunk and a buffoon from the start And where Remnick's portrait of the Chechen President, Dzhokhar Dudayev, makes him seem a pirate and an opportunist, Lloyd notes that he had commanded a Soviet garrison in Estonia in 1991 and showed tolerance then for Estonian nationalism. On the subject of organised crime, Lloyd discusses the strong reasons for thinking it is not just the product of ineffectual criminal law. It is the weakness of the civil law, notably the state's inability to enforce contracts, that makes ordinary entrepreneurs willing to become clients of those who offer a private-sector alternative. Remnick's view, however, is that 'so many of the "democrats" became corrupt because they just could not resist temptation. Under Soviet rule there were fewer temptations; moreover the regulator was external and strong, even brutal. When the rules of the game changed, it turned out that the moral regulators within the individual had atrophied; when the external regulator was gone, all hell broke loose.' True so far as it goes, but it does not explain why organised criminality is so much worse in Russia than in Poland or Hungary, countries that had a pre-war tradition of civil law to which they could revert when Communism collapsed.

Above all, Lloyd's book has an overall sense of seeking to cover the important questions. It is divided into five main sections. The first, entitled 'Power', is about politics, and the one to which Lloyd's methods are ideally suited – not least because Russian political parties are young and mercurial. Any coherent account of electoral competition must therefore focus on the individuals who have seized the opportunities of democracy, and cannot hope to derive much insight from any sociological analysis of the basis of their power. Elections have not been the only forum for political struggle, however, and Lloyd gives a compelling account of the coup of 1991 and the shelling of the Parliament building two years later that makes these events seem both momentous and somehow a natural part of the confusion. (Remnick's vivid reportage serves him well on the latter episode.)

There have been other major power struggles, too, such as the struggle over the appointment of successive governors of the Central Bank. Victor Gerashchenko – history's most striking counter-example to the trite thesis that giving independence to central bankers is an assurance of financial stability, and the cause of much Western lamentation when he was reappointed to the Central Bank last August – is portrayed much more sympathetically here than was typical of the Western press at the time. Lloyd does not deny the disastrous role of the haemorrhage of credit to industrial enterprises in provoking inflation, but reminds us how hard it was for Gerashchenko to resist the argument that allowing industry to resume production was better than allowing it to grind to a halt.

Behind all this is the figure of the Russian President, brooding and contradictory in his impulses:

> Boris Yeltsin came to power in 1991, a vigorous, extrovert, handsome man, exuding a charisma and a taste for the populist gesture ... By the end of his first

> term in office in 1996 he had been reduced to occasional and brief set-piece appearances, walking slowly and stiffly, his face pallid, his hands wrinkled and trembling. The presser of flesh and stump orator, who had loved the touch and feel of the crowd, ended his rule as immured from the people as Mikhail Gorbachev, whom he had despised for being so ... The leader who came to office with a florid apology that three young men had died in his parliament's defence (which was not his fault) closed his first term lying – through his aides – about the deaths of thousands in the republic of Chechnya, the invasion of which be had ordered. The reformer who promised the market would bring wealth saw that brought to only a few – many of whom were rich through his patronage. The Westernising democrat became a grudging, resentful autocrat, surrounded by a court.

It is a recurring refrain of Lloyd's book that those who have meant best have done worst for Russia, and that the real gains have come as a result of processes of change set in motion by those who did not understand their consequences and were often most effective when at their most self-serving. The decline of Yeltsin nevertheless coincided – until this year – with the stabilisation of the economy, the transfer of an extraordinary proportion of Russia's industry into private (if often corrupt) hands, the establishment of a vigorous and combative press, and an acceptance by most of those who seek political power that they must do so by persuasion rather than by force. The very fragility of these achievements makes even more remarkable the fact that they have not so far been dramatically reversed.

The second section of the book is entitled 'State' and deals with the law, the Army and the institutions of government. The chapters on the Army, on corruption and on the Church are well done, but another on the law is frustrating because of its focus on personalities rather than the workings of the courts, as in Lloyd's remarks about the first chairman of the Constitutional Court: 'Nervous and excitable, Zorkin allowed himself to be caught up in the febrile politicking of the times.' We are not told much about what the Court actually did. Since the character of a constitution consists largely of the constraints it places on the idiosyncrasies of individuals, this is a disappointment Lloyd never quite dares to ask: could the Russian reformers realistically have done better than they did? A later chapter brilliantly describes the strange nature of Russian federalism without helping us to work out whether the chaotic competition for power and economic resources between the regions has been a millstone for the country or its only conceivable escape route from Soviet centralisation.

> Soviet power ebbed rapidly from the Russian regions; Russian power was very slow to seep back, since in the ensuing period it had been picked up by the people on the spot and barriers erected around it. From the earliest months of the new Russian state, the regional leaders actively sought to weaken it by a series of strategies designed to bolster their power, protect their bases and enrich themselves. The very substantial success of these efforts has been one of the

> largest factors in ensuring that while Russia's constitution gives its president more power than most other elected heads of state or government the practical power wielded has been limited in the extreme, subject to continual bargaining and concessions. It also helps to 'explain' the invasion of Chechnya at the end of 1994: the system had so little of a normative base, depended so much on personal and political bartering, that when a personal relationship was denied as the Chechen leadership denied it to its Russian counterparts, the only recourse was either to cede independence or intervention with force.

Many comparisons have been made in recent years between the course of reform in Russia and in China, most of them strained at best since the two countries began from such different predicaments: one heavily over-industrialised and the other still overwhelmingly agricultural. But since much of the dynamism of the Chinese reform has come from the Township and Village enterprises, and has profited from the unformalised competition between the regions, it seems natural to ask why competition between Russia's regions seems to have served the country and its economy so much less well. (In Lloyd's words, 'a process designed to introduce a uniform capitalist market was adapted to become a series of local semi-marketised fiefdoms.') Part of the answer may lie in the fact that industrial processes under Russian central planning required a considerable amount of inter-regional co-ordination. Thousands of firms now find themselves having to re-evaluate business relationships in a world in which the demands of long-term viability (find new markets, exploit new opportunities) conflict dangerously with the demands of daily survival (stick by your friends, trust only those you know). The strategies to which they are resorting include networks of inter-enterprise debt, baroque structures of cross-ownership between banks and industrial firms, barter (involving somewhere between 30 and 50 per cent of industrial output even before the banking crisis last August, according to which surveys you believe), and the use of organised crime for contract enforcement, all of which tend to lock them in even longer to existing products, processes and business partners. It is a conflict that may make the process of industrial transformation longer and more painful than the Russian population could reasonably have hoped, and than they might conclude from the relatively upbeat tone of *Rebirth of a Nation*'s third section, 'Economy'.

Lloyd does not underestimate the scale of the transformation required. He conveys accurately, if impressionistically, just how inefficient and outdated were the capital stock and working methods of many Russian firms. He could have added that by the end of the Eighties significant parts of industry (making up 8 per cent of national output, according to one authoritative estimate) were producing negative value added – meaning that they took high-quality raw materials and wasted or degraded them in producing output worth less at world prices than the raw materials themselves. This is like using a Rolls-Royce to ram-raid a car showroom and making off with a Lada. Lloyd points out that one consequence of keeping energy prices low or negligible was a staggering waste of energy in both households and firms: I recall being told in the early Nineties that cotton-growers in Central Asia were in the

habit of leaving their gas cookers burning for 24 hours a day because of a shortage of matches. Lloyd also points out that many social services (like education, health and child care, convalescent homes and holiday resorts) were provided by firms rather than the state, making industrial restructuring all the more painful because it threatens not just people's jobs but their access to these services. But on the whole the current chaos of Russian industry comes across in Lloyd's account as a creative force, not admirable in any objective sense but inevitable.

Could it have been any different? Some things we can say: earlier control of inflation would have helped, and the break-up of the Soviet Union disrupted inter-republican trade patterns much more severely than it need have done. The failure of Russia thereafter to insist that the other republics stop issuing roubles gave a massive boost to inflation as each sought extra seignorage revenue of which they would have to bear only a small part of the cost Poland is a better point of comparison than China, though still an imperfect one, and the fact that Poland's recession was shorter and less painful owes at least something to better economic management. The combination of an inadequate system of contract law, the explosion in demand for the service of contract enforcement resulting from mass privatisation and the presence of large numbers of unemployed former Army and KGB personnel whose main skill lies in the use of force has given a boost to organised crime from which the country will take decades to recover. Health and education services have been allowed to deteriorate badly. The Government's example of systematic nonpayment of debts has encouraged a culture of civic and economic distrust that will also take a long time to reverse. Together with its unwillingness to enforce the tax obligations of the richest companies, this has resulted in a steep decline in the federal government's capacity to collect enough taxes to perform even the most basic functions of the state, including paying the salaries of the soldiers who guard and maintain the country's nuclear missiles. Whether or not these misjudgments can be thought to outweigh the achievements of reform, they have certainly added to the pain.

The book's fourth section ('Near and Far') is a mournful account of the foreign policy of a country in diminished economic circumstances and mindful of the fact that the missiles which gave it a claim to superpower status are more likely to explode by accident or at the behest of thieves than as pan of a Clausewitzian policy. There is no section headed 'Society', so many questions pertinent to the new Russian nation go unasked: questions about the relationships of parents to children, say, or men to women. The book ends with a section on 'Culture', co-authored with Arkady Ostrovsky. It is an impressive tour of the movers and shakers (in some cases literally) of the worlds of music, cinema, theatre, creative writing and the visual arts. It says not a word about schools and very little about people's homes, the places within which culture is transmitted from one generation to the next, and gives little idea which of the products of modern Russian culture reach and influence the most people. It does, on the other hand, convey a great sense of excitement at a world of rapid change, in which standards and criteria of taste and importance are in a process of continual reinvention. But it ends with a surprisingly austere judgment:

> The period of largely uncritical enthusiasm for the West, and of undifferentiated contempt for all things Soviet, was replaced by 1992 with a growing attachment to the Soviet past, and the merging of a nostalgia for the Soviet era with an equally nostalgic nationalism. This powerful confluence of two apparently antagonistic streams was not so much in competition with pro-Westernism, as caused by its excesses. The attempt to obliterate the past ... created a frivolous relationship with history.

That seems a little harsh. Think of Victorian values or the Millennium Dome. A certain light-fingeredness with history may be an inescapable part of modern democratic politics, the banality of which, as both these books remind us, seemed an unattainable luxury for Russians little more than a decade ago. Whether the current crisis threatens to snatch this luxury back when they had so very recently become accustomed to its feel is a more important question.

What have the events of last August taught us? The state is in deep fiscal crisis, but has been visibly so for several years (the widespread resort to barter by industrial firms has been a long-standing feature of the Russian economy). Neither foreign nor domestic debt levels would be particularly alarming for a state that had domestic fiscal control; but this is also to say that even if such debts were written off the problems would very soon reappear. In the first half of this year it looked for a time as though the fiscal crisis might be easing, particularly when Yeltsin appointed a prime minister who appeared to believe he had a mandate to crack down on the powerful tax-evaders, or to persuade them that their own interest lay in the creation of at least a minimally functioning state. August showed us conclusively that Yeltsin's heart was not in it; indeed, his heart was only barely functioning at all. There has been no change of President under the present constitution, and Yeltsin came very close to calling off the last elections, so a peaceful way out from the crisis seemed remote. Now that Yeltsin appears to have stepped aside from day-today government, the prospect of an eventual orderly transfer of power has improved. There is also at least some possibility that Primakov will be more successful than Yeltsin at fiscal statecraft. This will have been made easier, paradoxically, by the crisis, since the state will no longer be able to rely on foreign borrowing to postpone its day of reckoning. Nor will it be able to use the domestic banking system for tax farming, as it has done for the past three years by borrowing from banks with large shares of the market in household deposits. But even if this encouraging vision still seems less plausible than a collapse of the present government, power will continue to seep to the regions, which (if they are prepared to shoulder some of the central government's liabilities as well as its powers) may better be able to resolve the fiscal crisis.

The direst outcomes Russia could face are dire indeed: civil war (possible but unlikely), aggressive nationalist expansionism (slightly more probable), a nuclear explosion triggered by accident or terrorism (quite likely over the next decade). The best possible outcomes, for a country so rich in natural resources, are in turn very, good, so the balance between optimism and pessimism can be made to swing by quite small re-evaluations of the various probabilities. Optimists sometimes take comfort from the observation that Russia is in its

Wild West period, and that even gangsters, or at least gangster families, eventually form a powerful constituency for order and respectability. But technology has moved on since the days of the American Wild West. That period’s legacy to America has included both economic vigour and the easy resort to firearms in everything from robbery to drive-by shootings. It would not be at all surprising if, in thirty years’ time, Russia were one of the economic tigers of the world, even as the rusted weaponry sold off, dumped or pilfered during the days of its penury were causing havoc in the hands of dictators or terrorists in countries across the globe.

Vol. 20 No. 23 · 26 November 1998 » Paul Seabright » The Operatic Theory of History
pages 29-31 | 4564 words

ISSN 0260-9592 ^ Top