



# GOOD NEWS FROM RUSSIA

 **Libertarian  
Alliance**

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Such is the pervasive influence of the media that we rarely hear more than one side of the story. We all know that bad news sells and good news is boring, so we read our own news with a healthy scepticism, realising that the murders, rapes and crimes are not typical of our society, but pertain only to a minority of people. Unfortunately, without first-hand knowledge, we often fail to extend this scepticism to the news of other countries. India is full of child beggars, it is often believed; Africa is always either warring or famine stricken; China is full of desperate people eager to fill the sweatshops of the Western world if only we would let them.

And Russia is full of impoverished people, scarcely able to make ends meet, particularly since the collapse of the rouble in August 1998.

## **WE NEARLY DIDN'T GO**

Not so. In October 1998 I had the privilege of visiting Russia again, after an absence of six years. I was leading a party of English school students and we very nearly

didn't go, because the media had frightened the parents so much with tales of woe and economic distress. However, after much frantic communication between the travel agency and the Foreign Office, we were able to convince the worried parents that their offspring should indeed come to no harm.

My concerns were quite different. I wanted my pupils (serious students of History, mostly A-level or nearing) to be aware that they would be witnessing a Russia in transition, the product of a Communist ideology which had indeed impoverished the country, but one that had yet to see the benefits of a free market economy, for various reasons — entrenched interests, corruption, lack of law, psychological attitudes established over years of state dependence and undoubtedly many other factors. I expected the situation to be rather different than in 1992, but in view of the continuing problems with the currency, probably not much better. This was not going to be a luxury holiday, I warned them, even though we were staying in the best hotels in Moscow and St Petersburg. Don't expect food variety, the range of consumer goods and services that you take for granted in the West; they are not in any way, "natural" elsewhere.

## **THE STATE OF AFFAIRS IN '92**

Six years ago, although the Soviet State had just been dismantled, its relics and legacy were evident in both cities. The giant GUM, the state department store, lumbered along, its shelves half-empty and the products available of dubious quality. Certainly, the few reluctant browsing customers seemed to think so. Admittedly, there were portents of things to come. Littlewoods had just opened a branch and people were queuing to buy British clothes. McDonalds had opened, but few Russians could yet afford more than the cheapest hamburger — not enough to feed a family of three, as one disappointed customer discovered.



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**FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY**

I recall hearing a story of one intrepid local, who spent his whole monthly salary on a take-away pizza, “just to see what it was like”. Tourists of course, always had access to the best shops and restaurants, as had the former Communist leaders and high-ranking officials. But for locals it was a different story. I searched in vain for a café or snack bar in the streets of St Petersburg. At last, I found one. Lured by the smell and the queues that stretched around the corner, I discovered the grottiest little café serving nothing but fried sausage slices on black bread. Meat at the time was in short supply, Butcher’s shops were full of boxes of lard, and indeed lard was commonly served up in many menus in place of meat. Street markets were rife, many just consisting of lines of old ladies standing for hours on end, patiently hawking clothes — dresses, petticoats, bras (their own? others?). Sometimes, it was just their rationed bottle of vodka that they were trying to flog in exchange for something more useful.

Such was the state of affairs that was apparent from a brief visit in ’92. How much would have changed?

### “BIZNES MENEJMENT”

Lots. I should have realised from the moment we entered the airport terminal covered in advertisements that the Russians had discovered capitalism with a vengeance. (This time we had disembarked normally and not through the plane’s backside, as we had done on the first occasion — climbing down a ladder into the cargo hold, to leave with the luggage!) An advertisement for curtains over Passport control had me momentarily baffled. Some kind of new regulation? No, just an enterprising curtain maker making sure that his is the very first poster you see on arrival in Russia. This was a pattern to be followed time and time again — the proliferation of ads and my bafflement. (I have sufficient Russian to decipher words, but not enough to be always fully enlightened, so I am doubly gleeful when I can understand a poster or sign.)

There are now schools of “business management”, translated literally, just like that, it comes out “biznes menejment”. Never mind, as long as they do it! Many people are obviously successful. Huge avenues of Western style shops have sprung up in the high streets of both main cities. The department stores are now bursting with high quality goods and *Russians buying them*. Next is there, Benetton and a myriad of others. Clothes have always been high on a Russian’s shopping priority, but electrical goods are also popular now. “What is Whirlpool?” a curious old lady asked.

The more sophisticated are asking: what is a “Jacuzzi”? As for take-aways — watch out McDonalds! They have so much competition now — as our pupils found to their utter delight. The hamburger giant is still thriving — new outlets continuing to open, including drive-ins, to the complete disbelief of the older generation. (“You drive in your own car to a window and they sell you a hamburger, through your window!”) But, in addition, there are hosts of look-alikes, selling exactly the same products, down to identical shakes and apple turnovers. That’s “sheiks” and “gemberger” in the new Rusglish.

Upmarket, we found elegant cafés selling French patisseries, with Cappuccinos of any flavour — vanilla, cinnamon, rum — at French prices and with no shortage of Russian people willing to pay them. We roamed the streets watching well-dressed Russian ladies browse and spend, spend and spend more. Economic crisis — what economic crisis? Could these *all* be the wives of Mafiosi? Are all these “new Russians” crooks and gangsters as the old Russians would have us believe, the way the old British used to sniff at the “nouveau riche”.

### RUSSIA STILL HAS A LONG WAY TO GO

These are not former aristocrats doing the sneering, just ordinary people who cannot come to terms with a Russia that has changed beyond all recognition, with new Russians who know and understand what drives a market economy — selling what people want. Not state directives, not exploitation, just simple demand and supply. Not so simple to generations of people who grew up believing that the State would provide for them, now finding that it doesn’t, but not appreciating the alternative.

Yes, there are people still suffering — doctors who cannot afford to practice medicine, teachers who cannot afford to teach, pensioners who do not get paid, thousands unemployed from unprofitable businesses that finally closed their creaking doors, people in the countryside who do not yet share in the prosperity of the capital cities and eke out an existence on potatoes and cabbage. Russia still has a long way to go along the road to freedom and prosperity. But there is hope. The thriving dynamism of the cities fuels that hope and as long as that exists, all Russians need not despair. They too, will get to their promised land, at least those who know that they must work for it.

### ADMISSION FOR ENTRANCE

Lenin’s tomb still stands, and the body remains ghoulishly pickled and preserved. It will probably remain so, to attract Western tourists and their dollars, if no longer as a great socialist icon. What irony. Already, some enterprising individual makes a living as a Lenin look-alike, charging tourists for his photo. (Lenin would turn over in his grave if he could!)

The great palaces and galleries of the Tsarist regimes remain and have been magnificently restored. At least the Communists did not destroy them. Perhaps they foresaw the moneyspinners they would become. They were not totally stupid! Even the fabulous churches charge admission for entrance these days.

### THEY SAW IT FOR THEMSELVES

A visitor to the capital cities these days would see all this splendour — the gold of the palaces and cathedrals, the apparent affluence of the shops, the variety and hustle and bustle of the towns — and could be forgiven for thinking that the country is rich. It isn’t yet, but it could be. However, thirty three British school pupils remain unconvinced of its poverty. They *know* it’s rich. They saw it for themselves.