

RUSSIAN WINTER

Life and politics in a perpetual ice age

By George Feifer

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Trees, horses and beards were white with frost. The air itself seemed to split apart under the strain of the cold

“No, Egor Ivanich, be fair,” insisted the Provincial Governor. “Russian winter has its delights. Not long ago, I read that the huge expanse of land and climate, together with the hard struggle for survival, produces many good qualities. Absolutely right!”

“Maybe so, Your Excellency, but life would be better without all that. The bitter weather drove away the French, of course, and there are dozens of delicacies you can freeze. All that’s true and the children and skate too: on a full stomach, layered with proper clothes, the cold’s amusing. But for a working man – people tramping or begging or making pilgrimages – it’s the prime evil and torment. Holy Father, what sorrow, what grief! Men are twice as poor in such cold. Thieves are craftier and robbers fiercer”

— Anton Chekhov

A hundred writers have said it before and a hundred will say it again, but it is no less true for being a common-place that the way to an understanding of Russian life lies through the ordeal of a Russian winter. *Russkaya zima*, the great depressant of spirit and water of animation. It is not a season of the year like other seasons, not merely a longer, darker, crueller span of time than that which annually slows the countries of northern Europe and America. It is a life sentence to hardship that prowls near the center of the Russian consciousness, whatever the time of year. As a prime cause and a symbol of Russia’s fate, it molds a state of mind, an attitude toward life.

“Summer is one thing,” goes the old village saying, “winter is the plague.” Other peasants used to mutter that winter had a belly on him like a priest, who “brought forth nothing from the land,” but settled himself at their tumble-down tables and expected to eat his fill. The voracious feeder arrives early, stays late, and exhausts mind, body, and nerves. “Greedy, exhausting winter,” sighs Wright Miller, Britain’s

[♥] Although the Russian political and economic systems have changed in the twenty years since this article was published, yet the weather has remained the same. Winter is still something that must be faced and dealt with each year if one is to survive.

closest observer of the Russian character, “plants himself across Russia as the great waster and consumer,” eating away hard-won stores of food and fuel, burning away energy, patience, imagination, and the very breath of the people who must endure it. The guest is permanent, uninvited, wholly heedless of what he takes from his groaning host.

The section of Moscow where I lived as a student in the early Sixties was trumpeted as a showplace of postwar Soviet construction, but the freezes ravaged new cement structures as relentlessly as any Volga cabin. Bricks plopped into nets hastily hung to protect pedestrians. Joints severed, sidewalks crumbled into the snow. A fortune was spent mending the ubiquitous cracking, flaking, and cleaving, and much patchwork was abandoned midway as repair brigades were summoned to more urgent emergencies. Even the new Palace of Pioneers of a thousand magazine features had begun to succumb in its first year of operation, chipping apart before it was fully fitted out.

As in every public building in the land, one must wait on line to remove one’s coat, hat, scarf, gloves, and overshoes when entertaining the overworked cloakroom attendant. The morning line at the Lenin Library, as every foreign student discovers, can consume hours. One must wait patiently for the listless attendant to hang one’s things and hand one the tag that identifies them. On the way out, the tiresome procedure must be repeated in reverse. Millions of man-ours are taken in this way from an economy already disadvantaged by a dozen political and personal factors — and no one complains.

The list of such demands is as long as the season. (What Russian woman goes to the theater without a plastic bag for her “good” shoes? Even the sprinkling of elegant women make this concession to reality, for few are silly enough to engage city streets in less than a lined outdoor boot. If you are outside for more than five minutes during the coldest three months, it is no use trying to keep up with new fashion.) Yet these are the least of the tributes winter exacts. Buildings must be made warm enough for human habitations as a matter of course, but the special techniques for building in the permafrost that lies beneath more than half Russia’s territory impose a kind of “cold tax” of 25 percent or more in additional space, resources, and labor. The permafrost in the Lena River basin once reached a depth of 4,920 feet, the greatest in the world.

In the huge land mass north of Moscow where hardly a square meter is free of it, the first consideration is not how to construct new buildings but — now as always — how to stay alive. One foreign visitor recently described how he coped, for an hour at a time, in the far north, where a -30° day (-22° F) felt like a warm spell. The traveler dressed in three pairs of long johns over regular undershorts, then pajama pants and outer trousers. Two heavy undershirts, a knitted shirt, a heavy sweater, a fur-lined jacket, and boots over two special pairs of socks were heaved on, and “on my hands, a pair of thick silk gloves, then woolen ones . . . and fur-lined mittens Lastly, I put on the fur cap and pulled the flaps down over my ears. Shapeless as a barrel, I lumbered off into the outside world. The sudden cold hit me in the face like a fist.”

Avoiding all such stress, foreigners who arrive in June, July, and August — as most tourists and businessmen do — also miss the nation’s primary angles of vision and frames of reference. During the blissful but fleeting and somehow improbable interval when delicate northern green decorates drab cities and the scourge of ponderous clothing is miraculously lifted from shoulders and moods, Russians are likely to seem “pretty much like us,” with no “real” cause for being so different in so many ways. But the leafy days of warmth and freedom are numbered like secret documents. Impatient winter is rarely made to wait long. In Moscow, snow is rare in August but not unknown. “The nights waxed dark and the winter began to draw on,” wrote a sixteenth-century explorer, of late August in the Russian north. During the same week four hundred years later, a Western correspondent noticed an agenda of an apartment house “collective” posted below a decaying Moscow stairway. It featured a pep talk about “Winter Repairs.”

Thy neighbor’s overcoat

The first lasting frosts, however, appear in late September. In happy years, a week or two of Indian summer (“old woman’s summer” in Russian) has intervened — more fragile, more prized, when it appears, than summer itself. The turned leaves hold on in a gesture of defiance, weaving a thin veil of reds

and yellows against slender white branches of birches. As usual, Pushkin captures every nuance: “Now nature’s tremulous pale effect / Suggests a victim richly decked.” But the armada of snow-clearing machinery that is being readied in Moscow’s municipal garages for the imminent invasion resembles so many battalions of tanks.

In October, cold rains issue from a grim sky during the day and the nasty wet freezes overnight. The several million peasants who daily push and plod through Moscow searching for necessities unavailable in the countryside are already in the quilted jackets that will be buttoned around them for most of their waking hours until spring. Gorky Park’s beloved swans are removed from their pond before it freezes, and the paths are ribbons of mud. “Winter’s coming,” says a pensioner encamped on his bench in an otherwise empty public garden. How does he feel about it? Shrugging stooped shoulders, he offers, “There’s nothing to be done about it,” Russia’s motto of patience, resignation, and submission.

The trees are now entirely bare, and their leaves have been carefully swept from the streets. For seven months, the only foliage, apart from much-loved houseplants, will be the dark myrtle of the firs. Moisture streaks and stains the pasty yellow of pre-Revolutionary houses, while most of the new prefabricated apartment buildings look like cell blocks against the gunmetal sky. Much has been written about the dreariness of Russian cities, but little manages to convey the extent of the gloom at Halloween. Only the log cabins on back streets and in former thieves’ quarters are picturesque, but they are wretched to live in and scheduled for demolition. People are edgy and morose. It is as if the planet has entered some cosmic dismalness. Even the hard times of ice and iron air seem preferable, especially in the villages, whose roads are impassable moats of mud.

By November, the first snows have come and gone (traditionally, it should fall and melt thrice before arriving for good), and few but the political and cultural elite will eat fresh food again until spring, except as a holiday treat. Outside Moscow and Leningrad (present-day St. Petersburg), the monotony of diet — and the unhealthiness, for this surely helps spread the annual cold and influenza epidemics — is far worse. Meat can be virtually unobtainable, but fresh fruit and vegetables, apart from autumn cabbage and carrots, are invisible. The prima ballerina of Perm, a large industrial center in the Urals, queues until her feet freeze for a few stunted scallions to supply the vitamins she needs on the days of her performances.

Meanwhile the cold advances, sometimes in sharp ambush. The rain has turned icy, and at railroad yards, where even the most padded worker hurries to the fire as often as he can, goods are handled with winter’s sloth and clumsiness. (Engineers tell me, more in despair than disgust, of huge stocks lost and ruined in the snow.) An hour watching the October Revolution parade in Red Square severely pains the extremities of Westerners who have not taken seriously the admonitions of hotel doormen and chambermaids to dress warmly. Well before this, Russians themselves have unpacked their winter gear or, when their tiny rooms are too cramped with furniture and bodies to accommodate the bulk, retrieved it from storage. The overcoats smell of mothballs and of years of wet and dust.



Dark and ponderous, ill-cut and ill-fitting, the weighty coats are nevertheless more substantial than most Western models. Together with the metro system and the export brands of vodka, they afford a welcome opportunity for conversation with Russians about something they make better than Westerners, and simultaneously provide a clue to Russian survival on earnings seemingly too paltry to support life in this climate. A pound of tomatoes or cucumbers from the peasant market may be prohibitively expensive, but government policy keeps the staples of bread and potatoes relatively cheap. Similarly, such “frills” as a fashionable pair of boots or an imported sweater can cost a secretary more than her monthly wage, but a standard woolen overcoat is cheap by comparison — not much more, in fact, than a pair of black-market Levi’s.

An urban Russian's overcoat is a manifest mark of standing, which is why most people try to own a warm *and* imposing one. In one of Gogol's most forceful stories, "the Overcoat," a woeful St. Petersburg clerk who elicits nothing but contempt saves and saves to acquire, at last, a new greatcoat of the kind worn by civil servants and military officers. The handsome garment quickly transforms the wretched minion's life. Before it is stolen and he catches his literal death of cold, he is received socially by his superiors, fussed over, promoted. A trial I happened on in Moscow People's Court seemed intended as confirmation of how little has changed in the century and a half since "Overcoat" appeared. ♣ The imported chesterfield of a rich student, the son of a prominent official, had disappeared from his school cloakroom. Treating the matter with the gravity worthy of a bank robbery, the court lectured all present in the stuffy room even more severely than usual. Like horse thieves in the old American West, the notion of a coat stealer shocked everyone. (Telling me their life stories, survivors of war, purges, and labor camps have dwelled on the shattering shock to them when their coats were lost or stolen. It was more appalling, more threatening, than bankruptcy.)

The student's missing chesterfield was an oddity, for most Russian overcoats are supremely conventional, and only a handful of patterns seems to exist for the entire country. When the season for them arrives in October, everyone dons his in the course of a week, as if by decree. After this, it becomes *de rigueur* as the eternal portrait of Lenin in the office. A mere jacket is never worn, and neither is a raincoat with an alpaca lining that makes it more effective than most overcoats. A garment must be *seen* to be warm, accepted as a *proper* overcoat. Wearers of less can expect matronly strangers to wag a finger in their faces. "Young man, your coat is too thin. This is winter. Change it for a proper one immediately." This scolding is only exceeded when one ventures outdoors without a scarf and hat. In my foolhardiness my accosters apparently perceived a challenge to an article of faith, and responded with outrage. Winter must not be trifled with.

Only a handful of teenagers and tough guys make a pretense of being untroubled by the cold. On the mildest days, they strut about *without gloves or hats* outside certain metro stations, where factory and shop girls dally in the heated halls, keeping an eye peeled for anyone included to step inside to pick them up. In the virtual absence, outside of all but the biggest cities, of pubs, cafes, bars, and other such facilities, these stations have established themselves as meeting places. The young man's exposed head of hair is the rough equivalent of a California motorcyclist's leather, but he is the exception that proves the rule. One of Pushkin's numberless memorable images is that of a naughty boy laughing off his frozen fingers while his mother scolds from her window. School children are required to learn this stanza of *Eugene Onegin* by heart.

And even nonchalant adolescents know the half dozen words for "coat" in common use, each representing a fine distinction of weight, make, and purpose — and together testifying, like the dozen Arabic words for "camel," to the importance of the thing in the national way of life. The warm sensation of luxury produced on the ear by the majestic syllables of *shuba* spreads through the stomach like cognac after a day of cross-country skiing. *Shuba* means "fur coat." "Winter without a *shuba* isn't shaming, just freezing," goes another old saying. But like much of Russia's beset produce, most good pelts are exported; apart from high officials, who have access to a special network of shops closed to the public, and those artists, like concert pianists and ballet dancers, who earn precious foreign currency, no Russian can conceive of acquiring anything but the cheapest kind of fur coat. The luxurious ones worn by foreigners provoke amazement and envy.

Much is rightly made of Russian cities "warming into life" by the first heavy snowfall. "For a short while," Wright Miller has noted, "it seems as though one has entered a more benign season instead of a grimmer one, and strangers exchange remarks as though it were spring — 'It's here! I has come.'" The snow brightens everything, beckons everyone out of doors with his skis, sled, or snowshoes. But however much this has been looked forward to as an end to the dreary autumn mud, however welcome the first bracing day of white wonderland, one's pleasure in the coming of genuine winter expires when the annual

♣ To begin to fathom the importance of outer garments during the interminable Russian winter, read Gogol's marvelous story "The Overcoat" (p. 259-283 in Rzhevsky's *Anthology of Russian Literature*) about the life of a poor copy clerk at the beginning of the 19th century.

novelty becomes the annual trial and people are “reminded to dumbly of other interminable winters — a formless and inescapable burden like the shawls of old age.” By mid-December, Russians are already weary of their cross.

It is now gray: a solid plane of cold presses remorselessly on earth and shoulders. And cutting: icicles hanging from cornices and rain gutters seem part of some sinister ancient architecture. And still: overwhelming sadness sounds like the wail of a Siberian folksong in the subduing hush of Russia’s expanse. Like labor-camp inmates permitted food parcels, the population is treated to occasional cherished gifts. A bright day is polished turquoise: the sparkling air scrubs your lungs, the sun on the snow’s crust makes you smile. Faces flush with bonhomie and with the exalted beauty, while people talk of the good old days “when I was young and we used to have *real* frosts.”

The sign of Russian children on such days is enchanting. Bundled from head to foot, recognizable as human forms only by the scarves knotted around their necks, they have the red noses and red cheeks of dolls, the squealing laughter, as they pat their snowmen, of a forgotten, innocent childhood. Visitors lucky enough to witness such a treat leave with as much fond sentiment for winter as for restored churches and caviar. Again they have misapprehended, for such picture-postcard days — of twigs frozen like lace and of the smell of a world of fresh snow spiced by *pirozhki* sold from stalls — are as rare as roses in January or, indeed, as caviar, which ordinary Russians almost never see.



Cold to the utter limit

Hamburg’s annual average of daily sunshine is 3.7 hours, less than any other major European city — except Moscow, which gets less than half of this, and almost nothing in winter. From October through February, the average is fifteen minutes a day — compared, for example, with “foggy” London’s two and a half hours. From November through January, it is six minutes daily. “A grey pall hangs far too often over Moscow,” writes an Englishman in admirable understatement. “There is no changeable seaborne weather here” Winter snow is much more common than winter sun. A fresh dusting of it usually falls every few hours, often pushed into faces by raw winds blowing in from the steppe. “Every illusion you may have had about enduring Russian cold is undone by wind,” the understated Englishman continues, “and a five-mile-an-hour breeze has a grip like an iron mask. Twice that speed is already a blizzard”

In short, the wind and snow are in measures unlike any you have seen. Yet no matter how many roads it closes and roofs it crushes, no matter how much effort is required to prevent such misfortunes, snow is child’s play compared with the chief curse and main enemy: cold so severe that birds freeze in flight, as yet another saying has it.

Although literary critics debate the meaning of Dostoevsky’s dictum that “Russia is a freak of nature,” victims of the country’s cold mutter that it is the first and most fundamental circumstance to stumble beyond the normal. During hard snaps the chill is so intense that the continent seems paralyzed. “You launch yourself out of double doors and into the street and you gasp,” Wright Miller remembers. “You narrow your shrinking nostrils to give your lungs a chance to get acclimatized, but you gasp again and you go on gasping Another moment, surely, and the whole nostril will freeze over: in a panic you warm your nose with your glove, and you go on gasping. Half an hour’s walk gives you the exercise of an ordinary afternoon It is impossible, you think, to bear it all for long”

The worst day I remember was in the ancient city of Yaroslavl, 150 miles northeast of Moscow. Swift and broad in summer at this point, the Volga River was frozen so solid that giant trucks crossed back and forth like ants over the ice. The greater surprise came from the miracle of how man or machine managed to move in the searing hurt. I had never imaged the existence of anything so pitiless. A block of pain, the cold crippled as it made rigid, seeming to burn brick and skin white.

Wrapped up like sick whales in smocks, scarves and shawls, a few women were trying to sell pitiful knickknacks from outdoor stalls, again recalling Chekhov. “Cold to the utter limit, and drafts blowing into the stall from all sides like into a mousetrap You go stiff from top to bottom, go into a stupor, turn more malicious than the cold itself You start begrudging your family their daily bread The cold makes people mean, starts them slurping vodka.”

Russian winter is not simply colder than winter elsewhere in Europe. The difference in degree becomes a difference in kind. In the “amphitheater staring at the North Pole,” as geographers have called the country, Yaroslavl — or any other city — is far from the cruelest place. Cities are merely queues and shortages and endless “fixing” to obtain a pair of shoes or a Sunday chicken. Scant light penetrates the deeply recessed double windows, and months of sealed refuge in the sour stuffiness of communal apartments can cause claustrophobia; but there is activity and a measure of recreation for relief. The open country, on the other hand, is “an icy white desolation” that can swallow poor souls a few hundred meters from a village — while life in the village itself remains its “grim and ancient self.” “‘Tis winter, what can one do in the country?” is Pushkin’s playful description of the stupor.

Siberia’s cold, the product of a vast anticyclone that controls the atmosphere from October to April, belongs to yet another order. Over a land mass as large as Western Europe and northern America together, machine steel snaps like icicles, truck tires explode, and rivers freeze to a depth of twenty feet. Four thousand miles from Moscow, the coldest inhabited place on earth is here, in a valley in northeastern Yakutia that registered a temperature of -70° (-94° F) in 1959. The *mean* February temperature in the village of Verkhoyansk is -50° (-58° F). Milk is sold by the weight of its solid bricks.

Measured in terms of this pain and the reluctance to face it, almost any day between September and April can bring outsiders a fair distance toward understanding why Russia is . . . *different*. September 9, 1969 — to pick at random from one of my own years in Russia — is a tawny autumn day in Paris, with an afternoon temperature of 13° (55° F). In Moscow, it is -2° (28° F) and snowing. On January 20, 1970, the thermometer is at 14° (57°) in Rome and 3° (37° F) in Reykjavik. Moscow’s temperature is a commonplace -17° (1° F). On March 18, 1977, Berlin enjoyed a vernal 14° (57° F), while Budapest and Brussels were at 16° (61° F). Moscow warmed up to just below freezing. And when a long cold spell paralyzed northern Europe during the first days of 1979 with an uncharacteristic -5° (23° F) to -10° (14° F), Russian wags repeated another of their sayings: “That’s not winter, it’s summer in a winter dress.” Throughout last year’s uncommonly severe winter in northern Europe, when the new appreciation of energy costs made the cold more menacing than I can remember, people who knew of my Moscow years kept saying, “Now we know what Russians are stuck with.” Since they knew nothing of the kind — at the time, Moscow was rigid at -40° (-40° F) — their taste of discomfort only underlined how remote the real thing was to them.



Seen on a page and in a comfortably heated room, these statistics tend even more than most to disguise the phenomenon measured. But a few hours outdoors on the worst day you can manage this winter will help you imagine the daily demands they imply on every last Russian, and thereby begin to suggest the enormity of their effect on national life and national perceptions. You must also bear in mind, however, that the difference between 15° (a march day in Mallorca) and 5° (the same day in Hamburg) is far less than the disparity between 5° and -5° (the same day in Moscow). Hardship increases geometrically as temperatures drop toward their lower extremes.

Yet Russian winter’s power lies in more than temperature. Parts of Scandinavia, Canada, and the United States — especially Alaska — produce spells of equal severity. Outside of Siberia, with its small population of hardy souls, the agonizing days of -30° with a brisk wind are few. Unless first-time visitors arrive during one of these daunting spells, they may wonder what the fuss is about. As Christmas

approached in my own first winter, the early months of which had been less punishing than I'd expected, I scoffed and crowed to myself. I could take this better than they could.

My bravado soon stuck in my throat. By February, skin flakes, and shoulders ache from supporting the weight of the inescapable overcoat. Beyond this palpable weariness in bone and joint lurks a general fatigue produced by daily shocks and stresses, and by the permanent tension of struggling in vain. Now, when a trip out of doors is unavoidable, you bundle yourself into your fetters of clothing and trudge resentfully through the besieged streets, conscious at each step that this is a land of struggle and hardship. And of procrastination: like so many others, you are less and less willing to take on the dirty ice. You postpone yet again what you'd resolved to accomplish, find yet another reason to stay put in your warm shabby nook, where you ruminate and muse instead of working. In the desolate villages lost somewhere in the mist, millions of collective farmers are not only idling in their huts but have kept to their beds for warmth. "Then I am sitting with one, two three, four, six, eight, ten, twelve glasses of beer before me," as a privileged, uncommonly honest collective-farm chairman described his winter nights to a foreign friend. "And I am *thinking, thinking, thinking!*"

Announcements of sunset and sunrise claim that the days are getting longer, but the sun has apparently dissolved and the darkness that persists until mid-morning begins its dismal return shortly after lunch. Hardly visible in the afternoon snowfall, the GLORY TO THE SOVIET PEOPLE! Sign atop the State Planning Committee building looks like a grim parody, erected to remind the masses of their helplessness against their oppression. Lenin's sister's birthday is celebrated. The radio drones on about the production of bauxite and the 130th anniversary of the publication of *The Communist Manifesto*. Outside, snow removal machinery deals efficiently with the drifts bordering the roads, while crews of women in black shawls — "bowed and patient witnesses to the incubus of the winter" — deal with last night's new dusting, swinging their witches' besoms in the age-old scything motion. In 1553 Richard Chancellor, whom the English called their "discoverer of Moscovy," noted that these elements made him "very pensive, heavy and sorrowful." The difference between Russian cold and the cold one has known and enjoyed lies in the accumulation of hard days and hostile effects. It is the difference, in short, between hope and immutability.

This is why the metaphoric overcoats are suffered even when unnecessary. Rare as thaws are, every winter has its share of them. The mild spells, if they persist, may rid the cities entirely of snow. Now a topcoat will do, or even a warm jacket; yet on goes the full winter paraphernalia as if by law. Near Lenin Stadium, a group of teenagers are dripping sweat in their gear, yet none has thought to lighten it. On a morning of 9° (45° F), a People's Court, where pensioners will while away another day as spectators, is torrid; but asked why they did not leave their too-large greatcoats at home, the desiccated men cannot quite understand the question. Leave their security at home? Go about "undressed" in February?

Cold-comfort country

Winter, then, is not only a long, forbidding reality, but also a concept of tribulation, a kind of symbol and abstraction. Today's apartment houses, like peasants' huts of old, are heated to the point of suffocation. The maze of ponderous doors at entrances is maintained even with metal-and-glass architecture. Again and again in Russian life, one encounters arrangements not merely for treating winter with the respect it deserves but for protecting against expired threats. "We don't go out at night for fear of the wolves, of which we have great abundance," wrote an English traveler in 1820. "They are driven from the severity of the weather nearer than usual to the abodes of men. When the frost is very great, the poor little birds fall to the ground" It is as if these fears lingered in the collective subconscious.

Needless to say, a link does exist between winter's ardors and their hold on the imagination. Popular Russian novelists, in the thrillers of their day, often gripped their readers with stories of heroes who survived by dragging themselves one more frozen mile through a death valley of snow and ice. The most terrifying nightmare was that of the blinding blizzard that would suddenly blow up to cut off travelers from the world and condemn them to certain death. "The blizzard was so strong," goes a line from one of Tolstoy's stories, the most celebrated in this genre, "that bending full forward and gripping my overcoat flaps with both hands, I could hardly force myself onward over the shuddering snow that the wind was

carrying away from under my feet, hardly make the few steps that separated me from my sleigh.” Even in the cities, such deaths continue. A famous Leningrad ballet master named Alexei Pizarov could not feel his way home after an evening of drinking. He curled himself up against a fence, where his rigid remains were found the following morning. That week, a Moscow bookkeeper came to the same grisly end, and it doesn’t really matter whether the annual talk of student corpses found in the snow after revels is reliable. The very telling of such stories affects one’s attitude.

In these ways, the country lives in the geography and the history of its difficult past. Although some inhabited places are farther north on the map or actually colder, Russia’s numbing heritage of isolation and backwardness makes it more frozen. Much of Scandinavia lies above the settled parts of Russia, but its people are intellectually and spiritually thawed by the sea, relieved and enriched by contact with the rest of the world. And although winters in Ontario can be as hard as in Kalinin Province (Ottawa’s and Winnipeg’s average January temperatures are lower than Moscow’s), Canada, on the whole, was settled when man had sufficiently equipped himself to reduce their terrors. Russia, with its ancient memories and myths, remains psychologically the most northern of nations.

No single factor forms a national character, but winter’s dominance is surely Russia’s principal influence. Year after year, as I reported about aspects of the country’s social and economic life, from the appearance of the private car to the problem of epidemic drunkenness, I felt I was omitting the central one. As a certified “Soviet specialist,” I was supposedly qualified to teach Soviet politics and society, yet without sufficient residence in Russia to feel the inhuman weather and feeble human responses, I’d have missed the keys. In a sense, all the academic nuance I’d mastered about the exercise of police and other powers, the channels of absolute authority, took me steadily away from *Russian* perspectives and priorities as revealed by reactions to the despotism of a sullen February morning. For stifling as it is, deceitful and vengeful at the slightest provocation, the dictatorship is a marginal addition to Russia’s older, heavier chains. More depressing than I had imagined from textbooks, the brutalization of political life is also less important because it is subsidiary to climate, geography, and mood, the chief oppressors of everyday existence.

Before its collapse under the strain of the First World War, pre-Revolutionary Russia was closing the gap between its attitudes and those of the West. Totalitarianism has pushed it back to an older set, more like those that reigned when winter’s rule shaped the Russian outlook. Now as then, there is a tendency to drift into “fancies and musings . . . especially in the long winter nights.” Now as then, the average Russian is grateful for small mercies: happy then to be spared death by freezing or starving, and now to be granted a standard of living and a ration of freedoms intolerable to most Westerners. Now as then, long periods of austerity and confinement are punctuated by wild splurges and carousals to shut out dreary, oppressive reality.

The Russians’ exceptional ability to suffer cold does not blunt its overall effects. When forced or inspired to endure winter’s punishment, they do it better than most. “They are a kind of people . . . most patient in extremity of cold, above all others,” wrote an observer of Tsar Ivan Vasilievich’s sixteenth-century army. “For when the ground is covered with the frost, this Russ hangs up his mantle or soldier’s coat against that part whence the wind and snow drives and so, making a little fire, lies down with his back towards the weather” The extraordinary toleration of pain displayed at Stalingrad*, in the siege of Leningrad*, and in hundreds of unpublicized World War II battles (where troops stayed at their posts until many froze to death) is nothing new in Russian history.

In matters of winter survival, the otherwise backward *muzhik* far surpassed the world’s most efficient army. His traditional felt boot preserved life for hours, while the best Wehrmacht leather doomed legs to amputation; and where German tanks froze solid, oil and all, Russian drivers managed to keep some of theirs moving. It is also true that a handful of “polar bears” swim alongside January ice, and that at the \$10 billion BAM railroad under construction from Siberia’s lake Baikal to the Amur River near the Pacific

* For a good film about the Battle of Stalingrad, see the recent “Enemy at the Gates.”

♦ Read Harrison Salisbury’s *900 Days* for an excellent recounting of the siege of Leningrad.

Ocean, some workers stay on the job at -50° (-60° F). But although most Russians are proud of the nation's feats on empty stomachs, even boast of the salubrious properties of freezing days, a favorite old saying asserts that making a good face when dealt poor cards is not the same as having good luck to start with. These occasional indulgences — mostly to foreigners — are largely an exercise in making the best out of unpleasant reality. Apart from this occasional satisfaction at being tested and surviving, Russians indeed regard their weather as bad luck. A Moscow University coed with a fondness for Shakespeare summed up the general outlook. "Are we not human?" she challenged when I asked whether they didn't, after all, become accustomed to their climate. "If you freeze us, do we not shiver?" She might as easily have quoted "Russian bones love warmth," or "Steam won't break bones. Where it's warm, it's also good." All such commonsense expressions can help explain some otherwise puzzling habits and attitudes, of which the most striking is the dichotomy in Russian life that seems almost to split everyone's personality.

Winter — a state of mind

A gathering of Russian friends is one of civilization's richer pleasures. All the legendary national characteristics of hospitality, candor, and generosity flourish on such occasions, whose informality and intimacy are difficult to convey to someone who hasn't experienced them, or who has experienced the opposite atmosphere on Moscow's straitlaced streets. Above all, what distinguishes Russian social, as opposed to official, relationships is a quality of naturalness and "sincerity," an ambience in which friends, and even recent acquaintances, feel supremely at ease with one another. But these intense delights of warmth and understanding are exchanged in personal relationships, almost always behind the closed doors of rooms and apartments. In streets and shops — not to mention offices and institutions — a kind of jungle wariness and antagonism prevails, seldom relieved by even the most elementary courtesy. From snarls at counters to the traditional contempt for supplicants in government bureaus, public manners are the opposite of private.

These are not two separate sets of people, but one set in what it regards as conflicting circumstances. No doubt the stresses of the Soviet system — whose hollow hurrahs for its supposedly higher ethic breed hypocrisy and cynicism, while its shortages and a callous bureaucracy nurture a tendency to hiss and to grab — are partly responsible for the paradox that the most valuable hours and experiences in socialism's heartland are invariably private. But thanks at least in part to their climate, Russians perceive the outside world in general as hostile, and yet enviable, too. Going deeper, what is usually shrugged off as "bad luck" can also be seen as punishment; like handicapped children, Russians feel they are "not like the others," and tend to blame themselves for the stigma and hardship.

The inclination to exalt pain and suffering to the central place among human experiences is a kindred attempt to come to terms with cruel fate. Alexander Solzhenitsyn's[♦] proclamation that Russia has achieved higher spiritual development than the West "through intense suffering" is but the most recent statement from a long line of Russians who have championed this tortuous route to social progress. Perhaps nothing is harder for the human consciousness to accept than suffering without promise of compensation or reward. Unable to explain to themselves why this punishment has been visited on them, Russians are prone to sanctify it into a spiritual gift.



The other side of this coin is heartwarming "Slavic" camaraderie. Like people living under wartime stress, Russians radiate powerful we're-in-this-pickle-together fellowship. The greater harshness of existence strengthens trust among those who feel it, adds importance and intensity to the "stolen" moments of escape, heightens enjoyment of a luckily procured bag of oranges and of Chekhovian evenings of emotional exchange. This is what is often felt as the fuller "humanity" in Russian

[♦] Alexander Solzhenitsyn is the author of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.

life from that of the West, with its firmer control over emotions, greater distance between self-contained individuals, more “rational” approach to comportment and achievement. It helps explain why some foreigners visiting the country for the first time feel that they have “come home” to some ancestral family — one prominent sociologist calls it a “soul collective” — that merges peers in “deep warmth and sympathy.” But soothing as it can be to the ubiquitous ache of Russian life, this freer inner life hardly compensates for the political liabilities that accompany it, for all these nothing-really-matters qualities ultimately stem from a conviction that no lasting liberty can be won from the controlling forces. We are doomed, whatever we do.

Several years ago, an early-autumn sun warmed Europe from Stockholm to Barcelona. Slush and shivering were as remote in time as in mood. Men removed their jackets in outdoor cafes.

During this holiday *there*, Russia was stiffening under many degrees of frost. Outside my wadded Moscow window, a scattering of furtive figures hunched into the fraying collars of their ankle-length overcoats. Wrapped in the traditional woolen scarves, even women of thirty looked old and stout.

The first snow fell on October 6: an especially malicious start because the last sprinkling had fallen on that year’s May Day celebration. Now it was here again, the annual trial of nerves and endurance. On the skeleton of a new building, a pretty bricklayer in ballooned, splattered overalls hardly looked at where she was slapping her half-frozen mortar. The extra effort and waste would multiply as temperatures and spirits plunged, yet remain the least of the burdens.

When will this change? Not soon, according to orthodox Marxism. For Marx declared that environment determines consciousness, and more than anything, it is winter that Russians perceive as the largest force in their lives, the one that most “dims and slows everything down,” making them . . . different. *Grust’*, the more evocative native term for “sadness” or “melancholy,” seems to live in the darkness and slush. Struggle seems ordained and inevitable.

It is predictable that this country, saddled with one of the least enviable environments, talks most about changing consciousness. The “New Soviet Man,” bled propaganda as futile as Petrushka’s reveries, has developed “an entirely new political and social consciousness, growing out of society’s socialist foundation.” Predictable, too, that this saddest country makes the loudest boasts of universal joy. But the parades of red banners that proclaim HAPPINESS! themselves evince the unhappiness Russians see themselves bound to; especially after so many efforts to *make* them happy have produced increased suffering and tragedy. The very elements are hostile here. The dream of building a shining new world, free of all darkness and despair, is itself the product of grim conditions and characteristically Russian anguish about them.

“Russia will always be an unhappy country,” says one of its most astute analysts. “Even when it ceases to be impoverished, it will still be so.” A beloved poet of the pre-Stalin years named Sergei Esenin put this legacy in a single image:

*Thus will Rus’ forever keep,
With hopaks and hurrahs!
Wile in its crumbling gutters,
People weep.*

Russian winter is the song of Russian life: submit, you lost lambs, to your fate of inexplicable hardship. It is not a season like other seasons but a state of mind, an attitude to life. With great sacrifice, the hard-pressed people can build universities, libraries, palaces of congresses with imposing entrance ways, but only two of the hundred doors, the least commodious ones at opposite ends, are permitted to open. Otherwise, more cold will blow in.

A sea of bulging black overcoats colliding in a kind of human Brownian motion, the weary public pushes and jostles its way through the maze toward the promise of indoor warmth. As they struggle and squeeze like stockyard cattle past portals that were bolted shut as soon as they were erected, the splendid

entrances only mock communism and the other Shining Futures of All Mankind that Russians periodically offer the world in order to assuage their guilt and distract their own attention from obdurate reality. Nothing fundamental will change until the yoke of Russian winter is lifted from this people's outlook, and they surrender the injurious yet comforting belief that they have been wronged.