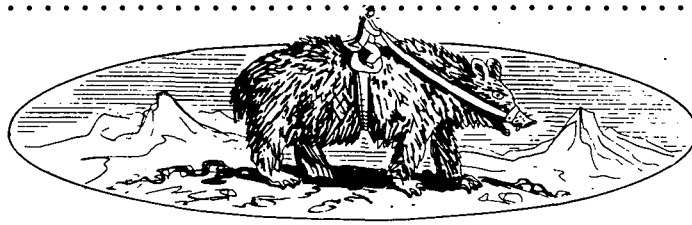


# SOVIET PRESSWATCH



## GROWING PAINS

by Cathy Young

Less than a year after the Soviet Union received its own (far more verbose and far less clear-cut) version of the First Amendment, the Law on the Press, independent newspapers have become a visible and unruly presence on the scene. They range from the dignified publications of newborn parties, such as the Russian Republican party's *Gospodin Narod* ("The Sovereign People"), to the frankly sensationalist and avidly read tabloid *Sovershenno Sekret-no* ("Top Secret"), whose publisher, Soviet mystery writer Yulian Semyonov, has long been rumored to have KGB connections. Somewhere in between is the irreverent *Kommersant*, which offers weekly updates on Western business executives' visits to the USSR, politically astute commentary, and zingy headlines, such as this one on a story about compensation to offset the effect of recent Soviet price increases: "We Won't Have Any More Poverty. Or Any Less." It also features witty video tips, mostly for pirated versions of brand-new Western films such as *The Silence of the Lambs* ("A deranged tailor requires women with soft skin for his technical needs, and finds out that a U.S. Senator's daughter would make very good material. . . .")—with the unintentionally comical translation *The Silence of the Sheep*, but even *Kommersant* isn't perfect.

Nationalist groups of the Pamyat type have their newspapers, with a knack for raising cutting questions with not-so-subtle irony: Is the underrepresentation of Jews in unskilled factory jobs a result of anti-Semitic discrimination? Meanwhile, Russia's first gay and lesbian magazine, *Tema* ("Theme"), has won a libel suit against the neighborhood paper *Karetny Ryad*, which had alleged that *Tema*'s editor-in-chief Roman Kalinin (see *TAS*, December 1990) had spoken in lyrical terms of the joys of pedophilia. (*Pravda* and TASS used the story as an occasion to take a shot at the radical Moscow City Council, which had allowed *Tema* to register legally.)

Cathy Young is the author of *Growing Up in Moscow* (Ticknor & Fields).

*Tema*'s victory in court must be something of a legal milestone for the strait-laced Soviets. However, a trustworthy Moscow source assures me that Kalinin privately admitted he had not been misquoted—but went ahead with the lawsuit anyway, since he knew that his comments had not been tape-recorded.

The circulation of independent newspapers has yet to match that of official ones, which is often in the millions. And there is still no independent daily, though the popular *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* ("The Independent Gazette") comes out three times a week, on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. The free Russian press is clearly gaining ground. What is it like to work for it? For an inside view, I spoke to Arkady Dubnov, managing editor of the weekly *Demokraticheskaya Rossiya* ("Democratic Russia"), in the United States for a brief visit in July. *DR*, which made its first appearance as a monthly in June 1990, then faltered and was reborn as a weekly in March, is published by a holding company of the same name, with world chess champion and *Wall Street Journal* contributing editor Gary Kasparov as president; its advisory board includes Vladimir Bukovsky, Elena Bonner, and the radical parliamentarian Yuri Afanasyev.

What's it like? The key word is uncertainty, a state by no means unique to free newspapers in today's Soviet Union. Anyone who opens a private business, Dubnov reminded me, has to worry about the prospect that such activities may be outlawed as contrary to the socialist spirit. But a radical newspaper has special concerns: Dubnov recalled the first gathering of the paper's editorial staff in February. "The first thing we discussed—and it was natural, in the wake of January's events in the Baltics—was that if we started making the kind of newspaper we were talking about, we would be the first candidates for a visit from the Black Berets. This thought, perhaps, excited or stimulated us to a certain degree." Because *Demokraticheskaya Rossiya* stays scrupulous-

ly within the bounds of the Law on the Press (which forbids only the disclosure of "military secrets"), Dubnov does not think the paper could be shut down legally, but the same effect could be achieved by extra-legal means, by cutting off access to paper or printing facilities.

With a circulation of about 170,000,

*Demokraticheskaya Rossiya* remains, after more than a dozen issues, a losing enterprise. Dubnov is convinced that the circulation could rise to more than 700,000. But on top of the paper and newsprint problems, distribution, too, remains in the hands of the state—the Soviet Ministry of Communications. For now, both *Demokraticheskaya Ros-*



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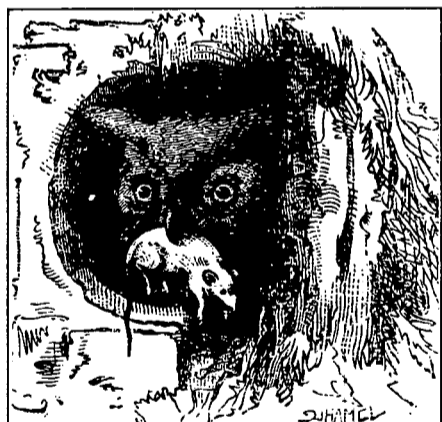
siya and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (which has a similar circulation but, according to Dubnov, reaches fewer readers outside Moscow) are available on newsstands only; subscriptions are out of the question for now, since the Ministry of Communications' terms are prohibitive. The Russian Republic has its own ministry of communications, which has plans to organize its own subscription service—sometime in the future. At present, *Kommersant*, which has been around since January 1990 and is backed by the wealthy Association of United Cooperatives, is the only independent newspaper with its own subscribers. Meanwhile, Dubnov said that they were getting “a tremendous number of calls and letters” from people complaining they couldn't find the paper. In the first weeks of publication, a caller from Pyatigorsk griped that it was being sold in that town at 15 rubles a copy (quite a profit margin on the 50-kopeck cover price), and added that he would gladly pay 20 rubles if he could only have a copy all to himself. Such zeal may seem a bit excessive, but Dubnov pointed out that provincials are starved for alternative coverage and points of view: the usual fare on newsstands in their towns runs to *Pravda* and the even more orthodox *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, occasionally spiced up by the cautiously liberal *Izvestia*. Currently, *Demokraticeskaya Rossiya* is working toward an agreement with several other major independent newspapers to pool their financial and other resources and organize their own independent network of distribution to newsstands across the Russian Republic.

Production is a problem as well. While *DR* is about to acquire its own typesetting equipment and to start doing the typesetting and layout on the premises rather than having it done by a small company for a sizable fee, it still has to resort to the services of a government-owned printshop—that of *Literaturnaya Gazeta*. (Similarly, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* is printed at the *Izvestia* printshop.) While government-owned, it is also quite capitalist-minded, giving preference—such as better quality offset printing—to customers who can afford to pay in hard currency. (Dubnov assured me that, curiously, publications of a Slavophile and even anti-Semitic bent seem to get more favorable treatment as well.)

Under such pressures, safeguarding one's independence is a constant challenge. About six weeks after the newspaper's March debut, the Russian Republic's minister of media and communications, Mikhail Poltoranin—who was a respected journalist before he went into politics full-time—invited some of the editors for a chat, complimented them, and announced that the ministry would like to co-sponsor *DR*. The prospect was a tempting one: at the time,

the *Literaturnaya Gazeta* printshop was threatening to stop printing the paper, and the ministry was offering help with money and printing facilities, promising, at the same time, to refrain from any interference with editorial decisions. The offer was to be discussed at a board meeting of the parent company but ran into staunch opposition from Gary Kasparov. The editors eventually realized that Kasparov was probably right when, having criticized some of Yeltsin's tactics and statements shortly before the election, they got a message from the Russian parliament conveying a certain displeasure. Dubnov said that while he naturally hoped for the strengthening of the republican government (at the expense of the central government's powers), he had “no illusions about counting on help from the Russian government any time soon. If it leaves us alone, that's good enough.”

Is the newspaper completely uncensored? Apparently so, always with the exception of “state secrets” (which apparently no longer include, as in the past, the inner sancta of Soviet sausage factories). A recent issue's humor page offered acid, hilariously absurdist “Gorbachev anecdotes.” Sample: “Gorbachev left home for work one day and slipped and fell on the ice. Pugo and Popov rushed to help him up.” Pugo, the hardline minister of internal affairs, blames the icy pavement on the “democrats”; Popov, the radical mayor of Moscow (whose often conciliatory attitude



toward Gorbachev is surely one of the targets of this satire), on lack of funds. Gorby decides to solve the problem by ordering armored personnel vehicles to cruise the streets of the city—with the sole purpose of breaking up the ice, of course. *Demokraticeskaya Rossiya* has not been prosecuted for offending the honor and dignity of the president, so perhaps he's decided to lighten up.

Asked what could appear in *Demokraticeskaya Rossiya* that could not appear, say, in the semi-official *Literaturnaya Gazeta*—from which most of *DR*'s current staff had defected—Dubnov begged to rephrase the question. He cited an obsequious article on Prime Minister Valentin Pavlov which had ap-

peared in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* right after the infamous monetary reform as the sort of article that could never run in *DR*.

All the professional journalists who had come to work for the paper, Dubnov said, did so at some cost—sacrificing not just higher incomes but all-important fringe benefits, such as the free use of cars and summer homes, trips abroad, and so forth. The rewards include letters from all over Russia—some grateful, others hardly so. “I get notes that brand us Zionists, Jews, kikes, whores, and various unprintable things,” said Dubnov, who is Jewish. “Such letters are few but they are a source of ineffable delight.” But hate mail can be more coherent, and more frightening. One columnist, Ninel Loginova, received a “death sentence” written in quasi-official language.

A similar missive, sent to the editor-in-chief of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* Vitaly Tretyakov (with the envelope marked “Personal”), was published in that newspaper; it is a remarkable document. Signed by “The Coordinating Council of the People's Committee for the Salvation of Soviet Socialist Russia” and dated April 3, 1991, it reads:

Because *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, and consequently its editor-in-chief citizen TRETYAKOV V., is inciting anti-Soviet, anti-socialist, anti-Communist psychosis . . . doing the work of Western and American-Israeli intelligence, and preaching the restoration of capitalism and Russophobia, the CC PC SSSR, by a majority of votes, has RESOLVED:

- 1) to sentence citizen Tretyakov V. to DEATH;
- 2) to carry out the sentence PUBLICLY;
- 3) to DELAY the execution of the sentence until the full restoration of Soviet socialist power in Russia;
- 4) to inform citizen Tretyakov of the sentence.
- 5) This sentence is final and irreversible, with no right of appeal.

Maybe they're just kidding. But the document is marked “Case No. 0120.”

#### Yeltsin's Creepy Veep

In comparing independent newspapers such as his to the dependent ones such as *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, Dubnov said proudly that *DR* would never balk at antagonizing anyone in power or rising to power, and pointed out that despite their political sympathies, the editors felt it was not merely their right but their duty to criticize Yeltsin if he did something wrong: the pre-election issue (June 7) ran a front-page article by well-known political commentator Leonid Batkin, “For Yeltsin But With Eyes Wide Open.” And yet, as far as I have been able to find out, most of the Russian free press gave Yeltsin pretty much of a free ride on one rather disturbing score. So did the U.S. media, which can always plead special ignorance.

The issue is Yeltsin's choice of a run-

ning mate, Alexander V. Rutskoi, who headed a “Communists for Democracy” faction (coming next: “Cannibals for Vegetarianism” and “Rapists for Women's Rights”) during the split in the Commie bloc at the March Congress of People's Deputies of the Russian Federation. Rutskoi, a 44-year-old colonel in the Soviet armed forces, flew 428 combat missions in Afghanistan, was shot down twice while bombing guerrilla bases (villages?), and spent some time as a POW; upon returning home, he was awarded a Hero of the Soviet Union medal. And that's only the beginning. In the spring of 1989, Rutskoi became one of the principal founders of Otechestvo (Fatherland), a major anti-Semitic group in Moscow. Around the same time, he ran for a seat in the USSR People's Congress. According to a May 19 dispatch of the News and Information Agency in Moscow, Rutskoi “enjoyed active support from Pamyat, Otechestvo, the district committee of the Communist party and the official circles of the (Russian Orthodox) Church.” When his top campaign aide, Lt. Col. Burkov (an Otechestvo board member), was asked at a meeting with voters for his thoughts on Sakharov, Burkov said, “I'd like to see that Sakharov hang.” Rutskoi later repudiated this comment “and said that he respected Sakharov ‘as the scientist who created the atom bomb.’” He lost the race.

In the spring of 1990, he ran in a small-town district for a seat in the Russian parliament (with the support of the regional committee of the Communist party) and won. In the same year, he left his post as vice chairman of Otechestvo but did not resign membership in the group. At the first Congress of People's Deputies of the Russian Federation, Rutskoi ran into a group of anti-Communist deputies in the lobby and remarked, “You'll come crawling to us yet, and bring the rope [to hang you with].” In January 1991, however, Rutskoi showed signs of going over to the other side, coming to the defense of Yeltsin against the infamous Col. Victor Alksnis.

I'm not saying it's time to give up on Yeltsin. But if the free press had done its job, Yeltsin would have dropped Rutskoi faster than you could say David Duke. And what *did* the free press do? The Batkin article chided Yeltsin for picking a Communist as his running mate but did not even mention the Otechestvo connection. At a May 21 press conference, Rutskoi asserted that he had joined Otechestvo assuming it was merely a group for the protection of Russian culture and disassociated himself from it as soon as he realized the organization was taking on anti-Semitic leanings. Yeah, and Duke thought the Ku Klux Klan was just a college fraternity with a funny name. □

# THE GREAT CAIRENE SALOON SERIES



## DOG DAYS AT HAMED'S

by Terence P. Jeffrey

Thursday is Cairo's Friday, when the Marine barracks within the high-walled compound of the U.S. Embassy is transformed into an Animal House with M-16s. Year-abroad Harvardians and Berkeleyites, hemorrhaging hearts from the Catholic Relief Agency (most of whom, strangely, are Episcopalians), and the not-yet-married daughters of the Egyptian aristocracy mix amiably with beer-chugging, burger-flipping, zipper-headed, ZZ Top-blasting, 19-year-old American warriors. The other English-speaking embassies have their own intramural fun.

But by my second Thursday in town I was too good for all that. I had moved to Cairo in the fall of 1984 with a purpose—to imbibe only the purest nectar of Egyptian culture. I avoided the embassy parties and the American hotels and bars, until my romance with unadulterated Arabism was brought low, and very nearly extinguished, by a never-to-be-taxonomized gastrointestinal parasite.

That Thursday I coaxed a Canadian diplomat, a classmate from my Arabic language program at the American University, to join me at Hamed's. Hamed's stood on the Corniche, across the street from one of those never-to-be-completed highway projects found only in the Third World and certain parts of the northeastern United States. This one was a four-lane overpass that would connect Cairo with an island in the Nile called al-Gezira. In Arabic, *al-Gezira* means "the island." I lived on "the island" in an apartment building called "the apartments." My Canadian friend Andy lived on the other side of "the island" in a neighborhood called "the engineers."

Most of the road crew had come from Nubia (southernmost Egypt) for the job, and slept in lean-tos on the riverbank directly opposite Hamed's front door. They were divided into two theological camps: half spent the evenings prostrating themselves toward Mecca and polishing a gloss into their prayer

beads; the others idled at Hamed's polishing off a few cold ones.

Hamed's—as we later came to call it, after the little boy who waited tables there—was an al fresco establishment. Its front wall was a Schweppes Orange Soda billboard, its side wall a crumbling twelfth-century mosque. The other two sides were formed by a mountain of every conceivable sort of junk, from Pharaonic rubble to Pirelli tires. But Hamed's principal architectural feature was a red-steel, top-loaded, vintage 1952 Coca-Cola cooler. Within it, beneath a brown burlap blanket, amidst whatever ice could be found, rested the establishment's inventory of Stella, Egypt's official beer.

As Andy and I arrived, the old man who ran the place was splashing down the dirt floor with a bucket of Nile water. This was a common housekeeping trick around Cairo—not only in places like Hamed's, which really had a dirt floor, but also in finer establishments, where the marble, alabaster, or hardwood had been overlaid with strata of windblown Sahara. Andy and I took a table behind the largest puddle.

"You ever been here before?" I asked Andy.

"Can't say I have."

"I've been walking by it all week," I said. "Couldn't resist coming here at least once for a beer."

A boy of no more than nine swung over to our table. He was crippled. His wrists were fitted with leather stirrups, which came over his knuckles to fit his fingertips like gloves. His body was bent somewhere below the waist, at which juncture he was supported by a leather sled suspended from his shoulders. He propelled himself by pivoting from one gloved fist to the other. His legs dragged behind him like an afterthought.

"Polio," Andy remarked under his breath.

The boy looked at us. "Birra?" he asked.

"Two," I said.

He swung back to the cooler. The old man fished for the Stellas. Stella is

the nationalized brewery of Egypt, and the beer is served everywhere in dingy brown half-liter bottles. The boy slung two of them under his arm and swiveled back our way. He opened the beers in two quick flips and set them on the table.

Andy and I drank in silence as the sun slipped below the Schweppes sign and the workers began shuffling into the bar. Two tired and leathery men in dirty gelabiyyas took the table next to ours. The old man turned on a black-

and-white TV that sat on a folding metal chair.

One of the men turned and spoke. "Amreeki?"

"I am. My friend's Canadian."

"Two Americans," the Egyptian said, dismissing us with a wave of his hand.

We finished our beers. Unbidden, the boy brought us two more.

A sad-eyed, tongue-dragging dog crept into the bar. His every step seemed pained, rheumatic. He made his way slowly to the puddle beside our ta-

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Terence P. Jeffrey is an editorial writer at the Washington Times.