



THE REALITY
OF POST-COMMUNISM

ALEXANDER ZINOVIEV

AND THE RUSSIAN TRAGEDY

Twenty years ago I read almost everything Alexander Zinoviev had published. *Yawning Heights* (*Ziyayushchie vysoty*) knocked me for six. The rest knocked me for at least five-and-a-half. Those writings altered my way of thinking about Soviet society. I believe they had a similar effect on many people, both in Russia and abroad.

Zinoviev's ideas fascinated a number of historians and social scientists, while his writing beguiled many readers, including some (not all) specialists on Russian literature. The breadth of his appeal at that time was reflected in the roster of contributors to a book that Michael Kirkwood and I edited: *Alexander Zinoviev as Writer and Thinker*.¹ Those contributors ranged from literary scholars to a member of the German diplomatic service.

Yawning Heights was by far the best known of the early writings. It is set in Ibansk, which somewhat resembles the Soviet Union. A large part of it consists of philosophical and sociological debate among members of the Ibanskian intelligentsia. They are all either disillusioned or very disillusioned with the Ism, the official ideology of the state, but are more concerned with understanding how Ibansk works. In amongst the conversations are passages of exasperated fantasy. *Yawning Heights* is not much like any other book. The combination of imaginative and philosophical fireworks at times recalls Swift or Voltaire, but the resemblances are not close.

Many commentators hailed Zinoviev's earlier writings as anti-Soviet satires. This was not quite right. They were, indeed, full of contempt for the ways in which people operated in the Soviet Union. They were not, however, full of praise for any other social arrangements. True, Zinoviev quite often compared communist society with "civilisation". But this was a rather abstract and possibly hypothetical "civilisation". It was not necessarily located in New York or even Paris. The earlier writings were above all about the Soviet Union. In *Yawning Heights*, what he had to say about Ibansk was only fleetingly about Ibansk in comparative perspective.

Among many other things, Zinoviev in those writings developed the observation that the USSR was an example of popular power (*narodovlastie*), not a regime imposed on the innocent many by the evil few. It may not have had open elections and competitive politics, but it rested on the complicity of the governed. He also argued that the communist social order was robust, and that it was the long-run destination of all of us. Capitalism was, or so Slanderer asserts in *Yawning Heights*, an aberration.

[Capitalism] is an anti-social eruption, that is, a temporary and partial victory of the creative I over the stagnant We. But that is a deviation from the norm. [...] Capitalism as a western type of society came about through an oversight on the part of the bosses. (*Ziyayushchie vysoty*, p. 414)²

In the years since Slanderer said those words, the aberration has spread and the communist norm has become the exception. The World Bank, the World Economic Forum, Freedom House, Transparency International and other international organisations measure the

"performance" of all or almost all the world's countries on "freedom", "governance", "ease of doing business", "competitiveness" and "transparency". Implicit in these scoring systems is the notion that we are all playing the same game: capitalism-and-democracy. Some play it better than others, and some are really rather disgracefully bad at it, but one measuring-rod fits all.

What did Zinoviev make of this new order? After a long gap, I have been catching up with his later work: his post-communist opus. In this paper I will argue that Alexander Zinoviev's post-communist writings tell us about more than one thinker's response to a world turned upside down. They also tell us a great deal about present attitudes in Russia. In particular, they illuminate the attitudes of the Putin-era ruling elite. Zinoviev had, of course, no time for his country's post-communist rulers. But that does not prevent him from inadvertently shining a light on their preoccupations and their reflexes. He was thinking what they are thinking, but more clearly.

What I have to say is based on *Zapad* (1995), *Velikii evolyutsionnyi perelom* (1999), *Russkaya tragediya* (2002) and *Rasput'e* (2005).³ I will begin with a minimally brief summary of Zinoviev's views on the collapse of communism and its aftermath, together with my interpretation of the emotions he reveals about the subject. Then I will look in more detail at what he has to say about the Cold War, the nature of post-sovietism, as he calls it, and why westernisation should be resisted. This leads to some thoughts about arguments of Zinoviev's that chime with those of certain western writers and with anxieties and preoccupations that have been aired by other Russian intellectuals and by the Putin leadership.

My own preoccupation is with what we can learn from these writings about the present attitudes of Russia's rulers. I am not aiming to engage in a debate with Zinoviev on my own account. I cannot, however, resist a sneaky bit of arguing-back: I will conclude with a review of some considerations which he has, in these writings, omitted.

THE GENERAL IDEA, AND ALEXANDER ZINOVIEV'S MOTIVATION FOR EXPOUNDING IT

The theme that runs through the four books is that the collapse of communism was a tragedy. Russian communism had its defects but it did not collapse for internal reasons. The power of the West and the traitorous collaboration of a fifth column in Russia produced this tragedy. Russia is not suited to westernism and will not be allowed to become an equal participant in the new, globalising social system. Globalisation is a new version of western colonialism. The West itself is evolving away from its standard prescriptions of "democracy" and "capitalism", and the merits of those prescriptions are over-hyped anyway. Russian communism could have led the world in a new direction, but was not allowed to do so. The long-run future, however, remains open.

The greatest social experiment in human history has ended. Russian communism is dead. In this book I want to describe it as it

was when it passed through my brain, my soul, and my fate, and I will be guided by the principle, speak nothing but good of the dead. (*RT*, pp. 296-7)⁴

Earlier, while still living in Munich, he said that he was moved to write *Zapad* when it became clear that his native land (*Rodina*) had been defeated in the Cold War and had "embarked on the path of shameful capitulation [...] and the mindless borrowing of western models" (*Z*, p. 34).

The motivation is not quite as simple as patriotism, though that looks to be part of it. Zinoviev also argues that in Soviet society being Russian and being Soviet had, for Russians, become inseparable.

In addition, communism was so organic for Russia and had so powerfully entered the way of life and psychology of Russians that the destruction of communism was equivalent to the destruction of Russia and of the Russian people as a historic people. [...] In a word, they [Western cold warriors] aimed at communism but killed Russia. (*RT*, p. 409)

Many, perhaps most, people on Earth live in countries whose ups and downs cannot, selfish considerations aside, be taken too much to heart. To confuse the fortunes of Britain or Italy or Denmark with the destiny of the human race would be daft. The fate of Russia, on the other hand, seems to many Russians to be momentous for the world as a whole. That is certainly how Zinoviev sees it.

The fact that sovietism, equivalent for Zinoviev to communism, has ceased to exist, does not reduce its historical importance. "A murdered giant does not become a dwarf, and the dwarf who takes his place does not become a giant." (*R*, p. 57) Russia has been diminished, and not only in territorial extent. In Zinoviev's view this matters to Russian or Soviet patriots; but it also matters more widely because sovietism, for reasons to be set out below, represented an evolutionary way forward for human social organisation. That way forward is, for the time being at least, no longer available.

One other motivation for Zinoviev deserves a mention. To what extent he was conscious of it, I do not know. That motivation is his lifelong conviction that the received wisdom around him is always wrong. When the conventional wisdom changed, he changed against it.

The fact is that already in my years at school [in 1938] I became a convinced anti-stalinist. In 1939 I was arrested for speaking against the cult of personality. [...] After the death of Stalin [in 1953] I finished with my anti-stalinism. [...] [It] ceased to make sense, and yielded to an objective, scientific understanding of the Stalin epoch as [that epoch] receded into the past. (*R*, p. 66)

In much the same way, when the Soviet Union, the Ibansk he had ridiculed, fell to pieces, he finished with his anti-Ibanskism. This did not entail a wholesale reversal of his earlier judgements. He had always de-

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clared a sort of attachment to sovietism. In his earlier writings he tore Soviet official claims and Marxism-Leninist ideology to shreds. In his later writings he treats them in just the same way. It is his attitude to soviet reality and its prospects that alters.

His major revisions were of two kinds. First, he shifted to a somewhat kinder view of Soviet society. Second, he amended his projections of the future. And all prophets, if they live long enough, have to revise those.

Zinoviev's intellectual struggles resemble those of earlier Russian writers, but not, on the whole, very closely. There is a pattern of criticism of Russia's rulers, followed by exile, followed in turn by criticism of the West. In this sense, Zinoviev follows the paths of Herzen in the 19th century and Solzhenitsyn in the 20th. What is common to all of them, and also to Nicholas Berdyaev earlier in the 20th, is a profound attachment to something Russian.

For Solzhenitsyn and Berdyaev, however, it is certainly not communism or sovietism. Berdyaev, who considered both democracy and Marxism inimical to personal, spiritual freedom, was concerned with his own version of Orthodox spirituality. It was not a version of Orthodoxy that appealed to the Russian Orthodox church authorities before the Revolution, and his version of personal freedom did not appeal to the Soviet authorities after the Revolution.⁵ In being out of sympathy with both the old order and the new in his own country and far from enamoured of any other existing order, Zinoviev recalls Berdyaev. But he is completely unlike him in his determined insistence on his own rationality and his preoccupation with society, not persons.

THE COLD WAR AND HOW RUSSIA LOST IT

A large part of each of the four books is devoted to the Cold War and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union.⁶ The account of that collapse shifts a little over time, with foreign influence being accorded a larger role in the later works.

In *Z* the argument is that the change from the Soviet Union to the CIS was not a transition to capitalism so much as a process within the framework of communism. Well-placed individuals grabbed the whole economy and left little scope for capitalism (p. 181). Zinoviev's implicit definition of capitalism here is not clear. He argues at times that capitalism in the West is turning into something else (*VEP*, pp. 444-50; *R*, p. 143), and at other times that something that he still calls capitalism is part of westernism (*Z*, p. 135). At all events, if he is saying that previously-hidden, informal control over assets in the late Soviet era was converted into formal ownership, his interpretation would have some impressive supporters.⁷

A few years later, in *RT*, Zinoviev is presenting the change rather differently. The Soviet social order did not die from internal contradictions. It was still relatively young and had performed well, for example in World War II. But the West won the Cold War. Even before that it was western influence that led to a particular interpretation of de-stalinisation: that it had to mean a move away from communism. This was not the case. The crisis that had arisen by 1985 could have been

dealt with by Soviet methods (*RT*, pp. 208-11).

Between the defeat of the anti-Gorbachev *putsch* in 1991 and the shelling of the Russian parliament in 1993, Yeltsin presided over the final destruction of the communist order (*RT*, p. 184). The West had to provoke the 1991 *putsch* attempt to ensure sovietism was destroyed (*RT*, p. 212). Later, when disorder threatened the westernisation project in the later 1990s, a change of regime was needed: hence Putin. The individual successor could have been someone else; Putin got the job, perhaps through an oversight on the part of Washington. But he was still implementing the westernisation project (*ibid.* and p. 215).

The West forced change on Russia not for the benefit of Russians but to destroy a competitor (*RT*, p. 200). Behind this assertion is a theme that is less evident in Zinoviev's earlier writings: social change as an evolutionary process. He argues that societies, states and economies have been developing into hyper-societies, hyper-states and hyper-economies (*sverkhobshchestva*, *sverkhgosudarstva*, etc). The Soviet system was one such (*VEP*, pp. 434-6), and was ahead of the West in reaching this development (*R*, pp. 63-4). The West has destroyed the Soviet way of life and extended its own influence around the globe. By doing this, it closes down the possibility of another, non-western form of civilisation evolving (*VEP*, p. 433). That notion, that alternative lines of evolution are cut off, presumably rests on an analogy with the evolution of species in nature: that a new species can evolve only under conditions of isolation from what are initially very close relatives.

Zinoviev's discussions of social evolution into hyper-societies are not systematic. He uses the notion of higher and lower levels of development. Thus, the creation of sovietism entailed the creation of a society on a higher level than any previous society (*R*, pp. 59-60). But what puts a society on some supposedly higher level? For Zinoviev it appears to be to do with increased complexity, as in the differences between the amoeba and the cod. In the case of the western hyper-society, it looks as though Zinoviev is pointing to globalisation and the concomitant development of companies and other organisations whose reach goes beyond the nation-state (*R*, pp. 144-7).

For the Soviet Union, the only attributes he adduces as signs of a "higher" level of development are the presence of a planning system, a party apparatus and an ideology (*R*, p. 63). Apparently in 2004 he saw merits in these arrangements that had escaped him when he was writing *Yawning Heights* thirty years before. But who is to say that Gosplan, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and Stalin's *Short Course* – or, for that matter, the complete works of Marx and Lenin – represent a degree of social complexity greater than that of Wall Street, Congress and the Supreme Court? I suspect that the discussion of hyper-society in these later works leads nowhere.

What Zinoviev is more clearly saying is that it is in the interests of western companies and (in some sense) of western states that the world as a whole be made into an environment that is hospitable to them (*RT*, p. 461). It is not a case of evil men plotting evil deeds, but is a development governed by social laws (*RT*, p. 261). Still, internal collaborators played a part (*RT*, p. 303). From 1985 onwards the Soviet and Russian authorities betrayed their subjects (*R*, p. 158). Russian history helped.

The de-stalinisers had betrayed Stalin and Stalinism, and the roots of betrayal go further back still.

Different nations have different propensities to betrayal. We, Russians, have this tendency to quite a strong degree. (*R*, p. 157) [...] **The population was an accomplice and instrument of betrayal or else remained passive (indifferent) towards it. The majority simply did not understand what was going on. [...] [This was assisted by the fact that] the system of power was so organised that the masses of the ruled had lost any social or political initiative.** (*R*, pp. 161-2)

Zinoviev was a one-man paradox factory. He was not enamoured of the Soviet system of power. Yet in these late writings he mourns its passing and depicts the post-soviet social order as grievously limited and without the evolutionary potential of its predecessor.

POST-SOVIETISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

"Post-sovietism", as Zinoviev calls it, is a hybrid of westernism, sovietism and national-Russian fundamentalism (*RT*, pp. 193-4). The western element is incompatible with the human material, natural conditions and historical traditions of Russia (*RT*, p. 196).

Russia will never, under any circumstances, turn into a country resembling, and equivalent in value to, western countries, it will not become part of the West. (*R*, p. 131) **At the same time, they [the liberals who reformed the Soviet Union out of existence] ignored the fact that western models are not a universal blessing for all mankind. These models produced good results only for a small part of humanity, and specifically only for the populations of western countries. For the overwhelming majority of the peoples of the planet they were and remain alien. In this respect the peoples of the Soviet Union were no exception.** (*RT*, p. 411)

In *Z*, first published in 1995, Zinoviev describes westernism (*zapadnizm*) as a civilisation with its origins in Western Europe. It can be traced back to the English and French revolutions (*Z*, p. 49). The countries that are within this civilisation are in Europe and in Europe's offshoots in North America and Australasia. They are populated by *zapadoids*, literally "westernoids", for whom the "I" looms larger than the "We" (*Z*, p.70, repeating Slanderer's thoughts in *Yawning Heights*, cited above). For a *zapadoid*, capitalism comes naturally. For others, it does not. Yes, self-interest is natural and universal, but capitalism isn't (*Z*, p. 68).

In post-Soviet Russia western democracy is being imitated but not implemented. The executive controls the legislature and the courts are hopeless (*RT*, pp. 203-4). At this point the *zapadoid* reader's heart skips a beat: can it be that our man is coming round to a conventional liberal view? Of course he isn't. Adopting these western institutions seriously would not suit Russia. Russia needs a Soviet-style, strong Kremlin and

a dominant presidential party (*RT*, pp. 204–6). This was written in 2001; Putin followed Zinoviev’s instructions.

So is the westernisation of Russia failing? No, because the mission of the westernising fifth column is not to make Russia fully part of the West but to make it West-like and (Zinoviev implies) amenable to western wishes. Putin is using communist methods to destroy communism and put in place something West-like, but there is no prospect of Russia living in developed or full westernism (*RT*, pp. 215–6).

Russia’s economic reformers and their western mentors reduced the Russian economy to ruins. Privatisation destroyed the Soviet enterprises’ labour collectives. These had formed the base of everyday social life and the base of social organisation. Unprofitable enterprises were closed because they were not good for business. Other [by implication] enterprises were destroyed because their functioning did not suit western interests. Unemployment resulted. This was surely not an innocent mistake. Advisers or bosses in the West wanted the collapse of Russia (*RT*, p. 226). The post-soviet economy is still taking shape but it is already clear that Russia has lost economic sovereignty (*RT*, p. 227).⁸

Post-soviet society lacks any vision of the future. Even the Communist Party of the Russian Federation has dropped part of the communist ideology (*RT*, p. 229). Appeals to unite against international terrorism are unconvincing; they are temporary, and American. It would be better to launch an appeal to oppose the wholesale theft that is going on (*RT*, p. 232). Another current ideological line is Russian fundamentalism, including Orthodoxy. Perhaps the next step should be a call to restore the Tsar and the nobility. “The pygmies of the counter-revolution are ready to become princes, counts and barons...” (*ibid.*). Marxism-Leninism proved inadequate, but that is no reason to abandon all secular ideology (*RT*, p. 235).

In short, post-sovietism does not consist of becoming a fully-fledged part of the West. It is and will remain a mixture of westernism, sovietism and Russian fundamentalism, lacking the aspirations and potential which were features of Soviet society.

So this westernisation is unattractive, to put Zinoviev’s view of it mildly. What, if anything, is to be done?

THE QUIXOTIC DUTY TO OPPOSE WESTERNISATION

Zinoviev treats westernisation as a powerful trend in global social evolution. In *Z* he develops the idea that the West itself is evolving in a more “communalist” direction, as it supposedly displays a growing role for communal (*kommunal’nye*) as against business (*delovye*) social cells – very roughly, public-sector as against private-sector workplaces (*Z*, 182-8).

In subsequent writings he does not pursue this theme. Instead he stresses the defects of a West that is not embarked on some softening evolutionary process. The West is a global aggressor (*RT*, p. 538). Western civilisation has inflicted more suffering on humanity than communism did (*RT*, p. 394).⁹ Islam is resisting westernisation, so it is being attacked (*RT*, p. 259). Terrorism is a threat that the West itself has provoked (*RT*, p. 539).

The United States leads the West so, these days, globalisation, westernisation and Americanisation are interchangeable terms (*RT*, pp. 248–9). It entails the reconstruction of the very foundations of a country’s life: of its social organisation, its system of government and its people’s mentality. This is not something that is necessarily forced on the recipients, but force is available if required. One western tactic is to create the illusion that rapid westernisation will lead to western levels of abundance very soon. (*R*, pp.125–6).

One reason for regarding this process with dismay is that a unified, westernised planet will be hierarchically organised (implying that Russia and other non-western nations would play only subordinate roles; *VEP*, p. 462). Another is that, even in its heartland, the western social system is seriously defective. Yes, there is democracy in its public life. However, the social cells, the workplaces,¹⁰ are totalitarian (*Z*, pp. 87–91). Zinoviev does not dispute that the West has had political democracy. He argues, however, that democracy is a temporary and limited phenomenon (*RT*, p. 481). Now the West is in the ascendant, having used democracy as a weapon (against communism), it no longer needs democracy and is tending towards a post-democratic phase of development (*RT*, pp. 477–8).

Does anything in the way of a prescription follow from this? As usual, Zinoviev does not advocate anything; not explicitly, at any rate. He observes that the old Russian notion of Eurasianism is absurd: Russia has no chance whatever of leading Asian countries against the US and NATO (*RT*, p.237). It is true that communism is not dead: China is still growing. But Russia is too absorbed within the western system to aid Chinese communism against the West (*RT*, pp. 255, 258).

Zinoviev’s conclusions about the future are modest, subdued and generally out of character. Westernisation should be opposed, but in the name of what cause? The words “communism” and even “socialism” have lost credibility. We will simply have to wait and see what the future will bring (*RT*, pp. 541–2).

So Zinoviev is clear enough about westernisation. It is not good news, except perhaps for those who live in the West as he defines it: the United States, Canada, Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand. But he is also lamenting the demise of communism, or at any rate of the Soviet version of it. What is it that has been lost?

THE PASSING OF A WAY OF LIFE

What was so good about communism? In his earlier writings, Zinoviev developed an analogy with flight: communism was like falling, and “civilisation” was like flying: the latter required more effort. “Opting out of the struggle and [...] of moving against the current – falling for a time feels like flight. People in this state do not think of what is to come later, in particular that after the sense of lightness come all the necessary attributes of slave and master...”¹¹

In his later writings, Zinoviev does not abandon the vision of communism as a system of subordination.

Communism, in short, is the general organisation of a country’s population in a system of relations between bosses and underlings – relations of subordination. (*RT*, p. 342)

He summarises the balance sheet on communism as follows. People earned less than in the West but also worked less. The coefficient of exploitation (effort/income) was higher in the West. In the Soviet Union, most basic demands were met. The system did not bring social justice, but it brought more of it than was provided by the western system. Work was treated as a right and the means of production belonged to nobody; these arrangements led to low productivity and therefore low incomes. Yet “the communist organisation of society suited the great majority of Soviet people, who were inclined by their nature to a collectivist way of life. But they took the good things for granted. They blamed the bad things on communism.” (*RT*, pp. 346–9; quotation from p. 349) Later he argues that, yes, Soviet people were indeed discontented, but this did not extend to supporting the destruction of their social order and the introduction of capitalism (*RT*, p. 398).

Production in the Soviet Union was economically less effective than in the West, but socially more effective. Zinoviev explains what he means by “socially more effective”: the Soviet system avoided unemployment and “unnecessary production”, while central planning kept the system’s deficiencies within bounds and was able to concentrate resources on historically important tasks. The Soviet economy functioned less well than the western economy, but it was viable (*RT*, pp. 350–1).

The Soviet Union had the most democratic system of education in the world (*RT*, p. 241). Corruption was limited, partly because so little in the way of material goods was available (*RT*, pp. 146–7). The Soviet Union of Stalin’s time was characterised by the highest degree of striving towards the future. This declined later (*RT*, p. 281).

Zinoviev’s defence of the old order treats Soviet ideology much as sceptical Roman aristocrats treated the conduct of religious rituals: nonsense, but good for the common people. Marxist ideology’s claim to scientific status was unfounded (*RT*, p. 521). There is no chance of restoring its Soviet-era status. (*RT*, p. 229). Nonetheless, the Soviet Union was a hyper-society, and in this respect “50 years or more” ahead of the West, because it had a party apparatus, a planning system and an ideology. (*R*, p. 63) (Here Zinoviev seems to be contrasting 1930s Russia under Stalin with the western beginnings of a “hyper-society” only after World War II. Even so, the “50 years” are more rhetoric than arithmetic.) Sovietism was the peak of Russian history. (*R*, p, 138)

The induced westernisation of Russia led to a loss of party control, an economic collapse and the rise of crime. (*R*, p. 129; *R* was first published in 2005, but the 2009 edition indicates that the section containing this judgement was written in 1993. By 2005 economic recovery was well-established and United Russia was well-embarked on becoming the party of power; crime had become more discreet.)

Russia’s fate is deplorable even if it is viewed in long-term perspective because, in Zinoviev’s view, it is the West, not Russia, that is exceptional. Capitalism and democracy produce positive results only in the West, with its particular human material. For most of the world, they are destructive. (*R*, p. 131)

FOUR ESSAYS ON RUSSIA

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SOME PARALLELS IN WESTERN THINKING

Zinoviev’s stance in the 1990s and 2000s was unquestionably that of a Russian nationalist. But his Russian nationalism is not based on any notion of a Russian “ethnos”: he says it is social, not ethnic, factors that account for the way people behave (*RT*, p. 237); and he makes fun of Russian intellectuals’ claims to a special Russian spirituality (*RT*, pp. 241–2). His motivation comes, in my view, from a kind of Soviet patriotism. It does not follow that he is saying things that only a Soviet patriot would say. On the contrary, several of his contentions are also put forward by writers with little or no connection with Russia or the Soviet Union.

Zinoviev’s definition of the West, for example, as Western Europe plus its offshoots in North America and Australasia, may seem quirky. But it corresponds quite closely to that used by the great compiler and analyst of long-term economic growth data, Angus Maddison.¹²

The economic growth literature also contains quantitative studies that conclude that, other things equal, a national heritage of Protestantism and a system of common law are both favourable influences on long-run economic growth.¹³ The strength of these findings is debatable, but *prima facie* they suggest that private enterprise and free markets do indeed work better for nations with a particular historical heritage than they do for other nations. This is not evidence for Zinoviev’s claim that some (many?) nations, if not managed or coerced from outside, would prefer collectivist economic arrangements; but it is compatible with it.

As for the business of importing – or forcibly exporting – democracy, Zinoviev’s scornful disbelief in the whole project has its parallels outside Russia. Consider the following, by Eric Hobsbawm:

Democracy and Western values and human rights are not like some technological importations whose benefits are immediately obvious and will be adopted in the same manner by all who can use them and afford them, like the peaceful bicycle and the murderous AK47, or technical services like airports.¹⁴

Zinoviev contends that globalisation is a US imperial project. This view is often propounded in the West, even if it is not quite the standard way of describing things. For example, both Noam Chomsky and Niall Ferguson treat the contemporary US as an imperial power, though they disagree fundamentally on its effectiveness and the forces propelling it.¹⁵

One does not have to be a Russian nationalist or Soviet patriot to take the view that “the most obvious danger of war today arises from the global ambitions of an uncontrollable and apparently irrational government in Washington.”¹⁶ Zinoviev’s view that “spreading democracy” by armed intervention is a cover for the hegemonic power asserting control for its own purposes is echoed in a more measured and less irritable manner by Hobsbawm:

It [the case for an “imperialism of human rights”] is fundamentally flawed by the fact that great powers in the pursuit of their international policies may do things that

suit the champions of human rights, and be aware of the publicity value of doing so, but this is quite incidental to their purposes, which, if they think it necessary, are today pursued with the ruthless barbarism that is the heritage of the twentieth century.¹⁷

Zinoviev takes a bleak view of the prospects of US or western imperialism: it may not live up to its claims about diffusing democracy and effective capitalist economies but in its drive to subjugate the world it is scoring straight A’s. Western authors, even those who are highly critical of US policy, are mostly more sceptical about its success. I will return to this point in the final section. Where Zinoviev really runs short of western intellectual allies, however, is on a predictable issue: the centrality in this whole story of Russia.

On this, however, he has plenty of Russian allies, not just among writers of the past but also among Russian contemporaries.

RUSSIAN ELITE ATTITUDES AND POLICIES IN THE LIGHT OF THE “RUSSIAN TRAGEDY”

Several of those allies are quite highly placed.

The echoes of Zinoviev in Vladislav Surkov’s stress on “sovereignty” were noted above. But there is no need to quote the monkey when the organ-grinder is available for citation. The speeches of Vladimir Putin sometimes read as though Zinoviev or, latterly, Zinoviev’s ghost had drafted them.

At the Munich Conference on Security Policy in February 2007, having begun by saying that this was an occasion when he could say what he really thought, Putin said:

We are seeing a greater and greater disdain for the basic principles of international law. [...] One state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations. Well, who likes this? Who is happy about this?¹⁸

In that speech he also complained about Russia “constantly being lectured about democracy” by people who “for some reason [...] do not want to learn themselves”.

Making Russia central to the development of a new world order seems quaint to non-Russians. With 2–3 percent of world population and gross product, a declining workforce and a heavy dependence on natural-resource exports, Russia’s only claims to influence are its past and its nuclear weapons. Yet the reportedly influential commentator Gleb Pavlovskii wrote in 2007:

The main challenge in the contemporary world is clearly American expansion. And no one, I think, except a sovereign, resilient and modernised Russia can contain American expansion...¹⁹

Zinoviev would be more pessimistic about the outcome, but he would have applauded the sentiment.

I am not, of course, claiming that Putin and people close to him speak resentfully about US power because Zinoviev put the idea in their heads. The feeling that Russia has been humiliated and the US is too powerful is commonplace in Russia. What I am arguing is that Zinoviev articulated the sentiment more fully than others; he set it out in a grand historical pattern: the evolution of hyper-states and hyper-societies, the identification of Russia with communism and the closing off of a path of social evolution. The notion of hyper-states is not pursued after *Zapad*, but the notion of Soviet communism as a viable evolutionary path closed down by skulduggery underlies all Zinoviev’s later writings.

Those writings help us understand some of the stances adopted by the Putin leadership and its advisers. Currently, Russian leaders say a number of things that do not seem to be logically entailed by their claim that the US is dangerously assertive around the world. They deplore the demise of the Soviet Union without deploring the demise of socialism. They maintain that competitive politics and the distancing of the state from the economy are not right for Russia, at any rate for the time being. And they seek to rehabilitate Stalin. In saying these things, they are not, so far as I know, consciously echoing Zinoviev. But Zinoviev helps us to see the connexions between these apparently unrelated positions. He is far from alone among Russian intellectuals in passing from criticism of the Soviet order while it was still in place to nostalgia for it once it was gone. But he makes sense of that paradoxical position more clearly than others.

Putin famously said in 2005 that the demise of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century.²⁰ Yet he has exhibited no nostalgia at all for Marxism-Leninism or for any variety of socialism. Some of his Russian critics claim, without revealing any evidence but also without being sued, that he is himself a fabulously wealthy capitalist. Zinoviev’s arguments, quoted earlier, that western cold warriors aimed at communism and destroyed Russia, and that Marxism was not to be taken seriously but the Soviet way of life was a viable alternative to “westernism”, make this apparently incoherent stance comprehensible.

This links the official reputational resurrection of Stalin in Russia with the latter-day resentment about Russia’s weakness. Zinoviev accepts that a defence of the Soviet communist order entails a defence of Stalin. He presents post-stalinist developments as an insidious weakening of the communist order.

It is therefore not really surprising that new teachers’ manuals take a positive view of Stalin despite acknowledging his “cruelty and acts of repression”. Nor is it surprising that Putin – having already, presumably, approved such teaching materials – publicly endorsed them.²¹

Zinoviev’s view of the post-soviet political and economic system in Russia is, naturally, much more sceptical and downbeat: the system is a hybrid, unable to match western capitalism. But in 2001 he wrote that Russia needed a strong, Soviet-style Kremlin (*RT*, p. 206). Putin and his allies have provided exactly that. Their system is a hybrid that they defend as appropri-

ate for Russia. Zinoviev deplored the limitations of an earlier and weaker form of that hybrid. His notion of how it could be made more appropriate for the country was much the same as theirs.

There is one glaring disparity however between Zinoviev's vision of Russia's present state and likely future and that espoused by the Putin leadership. For Zinoviev, Putin, like Yeltsin and Gorbachev before him, is an instrument of Russia's westernisation. He is not a force for revitalising Russia and re-establishing it as a power in the world. One might speculate that Zinoviev, who died on 10 May 2006, could perhaps, with more time, have come to see Putin in a more favourable light. But I doubt it. First, Putin's "vertical of power" and Russia's economic recovery were well established when Zinoviev was still writing (more or less up to his death). Second, Putin has restored only the political, not the economic, side of sovietism. Finally, Zinoviev never had anything good to say about any living leader, and showed no signs of mellowing.

Nonetheless, to the extent that Zinoviev in the 1990s and 2000s could be said to have had a political agenda, Putin has implemented it.

OMISSIONS

Zinoviev's late works illuminate recent and current Russian politics. But they also leave several rather large loose ends: topics and approaches that he might have been expected to address in any account of the collapse of communism.

The first omission is geographical. A large part of the world is simply not visible in these works. Economists like to deal in "stylised facts", so I cannot be too picky about other analysts skipping bits of reality. Still, a drama in which the main characters are "the West", meaning Western Europe, North America and Australasia, and the Soviet Union should at least feature a few noises off. What Zinoviev gives us by way of noises off are some passing remarks about China as a surviving communist country with which Russia is highly unlikely to team up against the West, and the generalisation that the non-western world does not stand to benefit from being "westernised", or at least will benefit less than the West does.

Where, for instance, do Poland, Estonia, Brazil, Chile and India fit into this picture? Would they all fare better, or at any rate live more easily, in a collectivist system? If some of their citizens believe that democracy and free markets are good for their countries, are they the victims of false consciousness or do they simply reveal themselves to be part of the *comprador* class?

That is one loose end. Zinoviev also omits any doubts about the West's invincibility. True, he does not say in so many words that the West is now, after the fall of Soviet communism, capable of asserting its control over the whole world. But he strongly implies it. Yet the Bush administration's ambitions for a transformed (westernised) Middle East look even more implausible in 2010 than they did in 2003. So far as Zinoviev is concerned, imperial over-reach, asymmetric warfare and all the other limitations on even a solitary superpower do not exist. If recent armed interventions have been failures or at most Pyrrhic victories for those who led them, what exactly does being a sole superpower amount to? It certainly cannot prevent an ever-larger

share of world income being generated outside Zinoviev's West, in Asia.

The third omission is opinion polls. We have rather a lot of opinion survey evidence about what Russians and others in ex-communist countries say about the changes they have experienced. Are the opinion polls so tacky (unrepresentative samples, leading questions) that they are inadmissible as evidence? Or are the opinions expressed simply not worth heeding?

In the boringly conventional belief that people's opinions are important and that at least some opinion polls elicit them quite fairly, I offer the following selected findings from Pew Global Research in 2009, including some comparisons with 1991 poll findings.

Opinions expressed about the fall of communism and its aftermath by Russian citizens, with some comparisons with Ukraine and Hungary, 1991 and 2009 (percent of respondents surveyed).

1. Approve of the change to a multiparty system

	1991	2009
Russia	61	53
Ukraine	72	30
Hungary	74	56

2. Approve of the change to a market economy

	1991	2009
Russia	54	50
Ukraine	52	36
Hungary	80	46

3. Satisfied with life (Russia only)

	1991	2009
	7	35

4. It is a great misfortune that the Soviet Union no longer exists (Russia only, 2009)

	Agree	Disagree
	58	38

5. Approve the change to a multiparty system (Russia only, 2009, by selected age-groups)

	18-29	65+
	65	27

Approve the change to a market economy (Russia only, 2009, by selected age-groups)

	18-29	65+
	63	27

Source: Pew Global Research, "End of Communism Cheered but Now with More Reservations. The Pulse of Europe 2009: 20 Years After the Fall of the Berlin Wall", November 2, 2009. <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=267>

There is a good deal here that provides grist to the Zinoviev mill. A clear majority of Russian respondents regret the demise of the USSR. Approval of the changes in the system has declined over time, though expressions of satisfaction with life have increased. Those too young to have significant personal experience of the old order are substantially in favour of the new order, while those with the great-

est experience of the old order do not share that enthusiasm: perhaps all this shows is that ignorance is bliss.

On the other hand, the proportion of all respondents in favour of the changes remains a half or more in 2009. This is too large to qualify as a fifth column. The determined opponent of the changes has to fall back either on impugning the honesty of the pollsters or, if all else fails, on false consciousness.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this essay was not, however, to pick a fight with Zinoviev. Sadly, it is too late for that. And his defence has already been prepared: "Even a donkey can kick a dead lion", as he said of the de-stalinisers.

These late writings of his lack the disturbing clarity of *Kommunizm kak real'nost'*. They also lack his alternative strength: the polyphony of *Ziyayushchie vysoty*, where different characters get away with saying incomplete or contradictory things because they are different characters.

What the late writings do is set out the grounds for Russian nostalgia for the old order, and the beliefs and attitudes about today's world that spring from that nostalgia. I do not use the word "nostalgia" to belittle the sentiments involved. Soviet communism was a complete and coherent world of its own. It is absurd to claim that this world was wholly evil or that what has replaced it is wholly good. Zinoviev helps us to understand how it feels to have your world dismantled, and how that experience forms many of the attitudes that lie behind Putin's policies. ❏

1 Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988.

2 Compare Nietzsche on ancient Greece: "So culture developed in spite of the polis ..." (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human* (1878), London 1994, p. 227.) Zinoviev's style in his expository works is sometimes reminiscent of Nietzsche's in the way he rambles for a while and then produces a sharp, throw-away remark. Very occasionally, as in this case, they even express ideas that are closely similar.

3 Bibliographic details of these and other writings cited are given in "References" at the end. I will refer to the above four books henceforth as *Z*, *VEP*, *RT* and *R*.

4 He does not of course succeed in adhering to this pious strategy. It is hard to imagine Zinoviev saying nothing but good about anything or anyone. I wrote of him in 1988, "There are two modes of expression which he does not command: the eulogy and the footnote." (Philip Hanson & Michael Kirkwood (eds.), *Alexander Zinoviev as Writer and Thinker*, Basingstoke 1988, p. 163.) He has set me right about footnotes. There is a sudden eruption of them in *Z*. They do not descend to the sordid pedantry of publication details and page numbers. Still, they cover the waterfront: from Daniel Bell and William Beveridge to Ayn Rand and Adam Smith. At first I suspected the intrusion of a fussy editor, but the footnote citing *TV Hören und Sehen* persuaded me that the references were indeed the work of the master himself. Later writings revert to his Olympian norm: they are not disfigured by footnotes; let alone end-notes.

5 See, among many other works, Berdyaev's *The Origin of Russian Communism*, London 1937.

6 It has to be said that there is a good deal of repetition across the four books. In the form in which I have them – as volumes in the complete collected works (see References) – it is not clear which pieces appeared first as separate articles, though it seems that quite a few did. There are also literal, word-for-word repetitions in these editions. In *RT* pp. 462-77 repeat

pp. 192-208; 487-98 repeat 208-18; 508-17 repeat 218-28; and 523-37 repeat 228-41. With trivial differences in sub-headings and paragraphing, pp. 435-51 of *RT* repeat pp. 164-79 of *R*. As a member of the international editorial council, I can only plead an oversight on the part of the bosses.

7 For example, Vasilii Naishul, *The Supreme and Late Stage of Socialism: An Essay*, London 1991; Yegor Gaidar, *State and Evolution*, Seattle 2003.

8 This was written and published in 2002. "Sovereign" became a widely-used Putinist adjective several years later. Reportedly, the first usage of the phrase "sovereign democracy" in the Putinist-prescriptive sense for Russia was by Vladislav Surkov in a speech delivered on 22 February 2006 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sovereign_democracy, accessed 22 December 2009).

9 He does not elaborate on this. One can see that totting up colonial wars and two world wars would give the West a head start. But on a havoc-wreaked-per-annum basis it might be a close-run thing.

10 The workplace collective is the building-block in Zinoviev's sociology. The role of communal existence as the key to understanding communism is developed in his *Kommunizm kak real'nost'*. The view he took at that time of life in a communist collective is summarised in the cover design (painted by Zinoviev himself): two rats simultaneously shaking hands and strangling one another.

11 Aleksandr Zinoviev, "Pochemu my raby", *Zinoviev*, No 2 (5), 2009, pp. 16-18. The piece is said there to have been written in 1980. It was probably also published then, but the 2009 source does not say where.

12 Angus Maddison, *The World Economy 1820-1992. Analysis and Statistics*, Paris 1995.

13 Sources cited in Philip Hanson, "Barriers to Long-run Growth in Russia", *Economy and Society*, vol. 31:1.

14 Eric Hobsbawm, *Globalisation, Democracy and Terrorism*, London 2007, p. 11.

15 E.g., Noam Chomsky, *Failed States: The Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy*, New York 2006; Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire*, London 2005.

16 Hobsbawm, *Globalisation ...*, p.48. The government to which Hobsbawm was referring was that of George W. Bush. The Obama administration has not, by early 2010, changed things very much.

17 Hobsbawm, *Globalisation...*, p.7.

18 http://eng.kremlin.ru/speeches/2007/02/10/0138_type82912type82914type82917type84779_118123.shtml

19 "Chego zhdat' ot Putina?" www.lenta.ru/conf/pavlosky/ 19 October 2007.

20 http://archive.kremlin.ru/appears/2005/04/25/1223_type63372type63374type82634_87049.shtml. The disgraceful lack of definite and indefinite articles in Russian makes it just possible to translate this as "a very great" rather than "the greatest", but the usual translation fits the sentence better.

21 Henry Meyer, "Stalin Back in Vogue as Putin Endorses History-Book Nostalgia", *Bloomberg*, November 29, 2007.

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* Page references in this article are to these later publications.

