



Russia

ECONOMY

Moscow: A New Revolution

The collapse of communism in Russia in the early 1990s has brought great change to that nation. Perhaps the greatest change has been to Moscow, its capital and once the capital of the former Soviet Union. Here, a frequent visitor to Moscow describes some of the ways in which the city has changed.

To visit Moscow . . . since the collapse of communism and the Soviet state is to be thunderstruck on a daily basis. . . . Youth gangs form, recapitulating [repeating] . . . the history of young people in the West—Hippies, Punks, Grungers, Skinheads, Metal Heads, Tolkienites; . . . a 19th-century downtown apartment building is cleaned out [of its residents] by mafiosi [mobsters] who have decided “to privatize” the place. . . . The changes reach to the most basic stuff of everyday life. Lines are rare now, but there are more homeless living in underpasses, train stations, city parks. . . .

Not long ago, on one of many trips to Moscow since the Soviet collapse, I met a woman named Larissa Pavlova. She was a teacher who now sold old clothes evenings and weekends to supplement her family’s income. Countless thousands of Muscovites work second and third jobs to get by in a world of higher prices, greater appetites, and disappearing social guarantees. “Moscow is filled with what our good Comrade Lenin called contradictions,” she said. “The rich get richer and the rest of us tread water or drown. I work much harder than I did in the old days, and sometimes that makes it hard to remember what we’ve gained. Freedom is sweet, but it’s also a heavy, heavy load.”

The rules of class and privilege in Moscow are approaching the draconian [extremely harsh] code of the industrialized West. Money talks. . . . If you have cash (or a credit card) in Moscow, you can taste it all: lobsters flown in from Maine, salmon from Scotland, caviar from Azerbaijan, lamb from Auckland, pineapple from Hawaii. Visitors to Moscow in the seventies remember well the dreary ritual of eating at restaurants offering shoelike “cutlets” and bonelike “chicken tabaca.” Now there is every cuisine imaginable. . . .

There are other cities in Russia that have, each in its own way, joined this process of transformation . . . but the center of it all is still Moscow. There really is no second place. Even St. Petersburg, with its historical role as [Russia’s] window on the West, cannot compare. More than 60 percent of foreign investment in Russia is in Moscow. The banks, the businesses, the political actors, the cultural and intellectual institutions, the information and communications nexus [connections], the trends in fashion, language, and culture—all of it is centered in the capital. . . . “You cannot understand Russia just by understanding Moscow,” the reform politician Grigory Yavlinsky told me, “but without understanding Moscow you can’t understand the future.” . . .

If you have money in Moscow, you might live in a gated mansion outside town and send your kids to boarding school in the Alps; you also might meet your end in a contract hit, blown to smithereens by a bomb ignited by state-of-the-art remote control. . . . If you have money in Moscow, you might slap down several thousand dollars to join a private club; the highlight of the evening at one now defunct [no longer open] establishment was a rat race, featuring real rats sprinting through a neon-lit maze. (The race did not begin until a dwarf dressed as an 18th-century page rang the bell.) The owner of a nightclub called the Silver Century is planning to open a new club near Lubyanka Square within firing distance of the old KGB (former Soviet secret police) headquarters. He has announced a . . . desire to have party games. He said he would like to hold mock arrests and serve dishes like “Brains of the enemy of the people.” Outside one club I talked to a guard named Vasha, a wiry and ancient man, who told me, “When I was a boy, we used to hunt down rich people and jail them. Now we guard them. For money.”

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Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. According to the reading, how are most Muscovites adjusting to the change from a communist economic system to a capitalist one?

2. The author writes of “rules of class and privilege” that are developing in Moscow. What does he mean by this, and how are these “rules” affecting the city and its people?

Activity

Imagine that you are a citizen of Moscow. Write a letter to the editor of a local newspaper expressing your feelings about how Moscow is changing.