Cold Comforts

Returning to Russia in A Terrible Country
by Maggie Doherty

Perusing social media in recent months, you get the sense that Russia once again looms as America’s great antagonist. Russians are meddling in our election and colluding with our president. The KGB is stealing our private data and spreading “fake news.” Anyone who says something controversial on social media can scapegoat a Russian bot. The Cold War is back, this time as farce: rather than a global contest between workers and capitalists, there are oligarchs and thugs on all sides.

In this moment of high-pitched, heated commentary, A Terrible Country, Keith Gessen’s second novel, arrives like a cold, welcome wind. Gessen ’97 packs his book with observations about contemporary Russian life. The liberal radio station, Echo, criticizes Putin freely; the trains still run every two minutes, but they are horribly overcrowded; only older cars, usually driven by Chechen men, pick up passengers on the street.

But A Terrible Country is less a travelogue, or a guide to post-Soviet Russia, than it is a novel about life under neoliberalism—a political ideology that dictates that the market, not the state, rules the citizenry. Under neoliberalism, citizens identify primarily as consumers, and competition—for housing, healthcare, employment, even for affection and care—becomes a feature of daily life. Neoliberalism manifests differently in different countries, and Gessen takes care to describe the forms of political and economic oppression specific to the novel’s setting. Nevertheless, to an American reader, life in Putin’s Russia looks more familiar than she might expect.

To show the continuity between these former Cold War enemies, Gessen deploys an ideal narrator: Andrei Kaplan, a Russian-born American academic, who observes Moscow with a useful combination of knowledge and naiveté. Preparing for his trip, Andrei expects to encounter a country in turmoil. “I had half expected to be arrested at the airport! I thought I’d be robbed on the train.” But when he arrives, he is struck by how copacetic he finds the country, and by how much has changed since he visited his family in 1981, when he was six, has always been inextricably intertwined.” But laissez-faire economics don’t benefit everyone. A Terrible Country aims to show how oppression and luxury coexist.

Gessen, who immigrated to America with his family in 1981, when he was six, has written elsewhere about the country of his birth. A founding editor of the leftist liter-
A terrible country opens in the summer of 2008, just a few months shy of the global financial crisis. A scholar of Russian literature and history, Andrei has failed to find a tenure-track position and has been reduced to teaching online sections for a New York University’s “paid massive online open course,” or PMOOC. It’s a dismal job, and he can no longer afford New York City. When his older brother, Dima, offers him the chance to move to Moscow and tend to their 89-year-old grandmother, Andrei jumps at it. Baba Seva, a Ukrainian-born Jewish woman who became a lecturer at Moscow State, lives in a centrally located apartment, gifted to her by none other than Stalin himself. Andrei plans to interview his grandmother about all she has witnessed in her long, difficult life—the war, the purges, the rise of Stalin and the fall of communism—and shape an academic article out of her remembrances. Drunk at a farewell party, he contemplates the “glamor that might attend spending time in an increasingly violent and dictatorial Russia.”

But his life there is decidedly unglamorous. The apartment is old and small; the sheets are scratchy; the plumbing fails. Baba Seva’s memory is going; she can barely remember what Andrei is, let alone provide an oral history. She is preoccupied with her dead friends, her dead daughter (Andrei’s mother), and her lack of a dacha. Though Andrei is stunned by the wealth he sees all around him, Baba Seva barely registers it. She instead asks Andrei repeatedly why he has come to this “terrible country.”

It’s a good question: Andrei feels as poor by what his teammate knows but also by how he came to know it. “You didn’t have to go and read a thousand books,” Andrei thinks. “You just had to stay where you were and look around.”

Inspired, Andrei joins Sergei and Yulia’s socialist organizing group, October. The activists protest against fascism and collectively read Marx. They even organize a protest under Putin; even an essay about Moscow’s infamously bad traffic, for a 2010 issue of The New Yorker, contains a critique of capitalism.

Such political analysis is trickier to accomplish in fiction. Some writers stage debates in their fiction; others write satire, and still others produce novels of ideas. Gessen tries to make politics a primary concern of his characters. In his 2008 novel, All the Sad Young Literary Men, politics most often served as material for a character’s creative or intellectual work. One protagonist is more interested in dating than in finishing his dissertation about the Russian Revolution. Another plans to write a “great Zionist epic,” but cares more about the number of hits his name gets on Google than about the history of Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In his second novel, Gessen takes politics more seriously. A terrible country is a more mature work, written in pared-down prose noticeably different from the headlong style of the first novel. The sentences are simple and direct, as if subordinate clauses were the stuff of youth. The book is funny, but darkly so—many of the best jokes are about the protagonist’s disappointment in himself and in others. If that earlier work sometimes presented political consciousness as simply part of one’s personal style, this novel describes what it means to live politically, with all the excitement and hazard that accompany such a life.
The sad young literary men (and women) in *A Terrible Country* don’t study Marx, or deliver lectures on neoliberalism, simply to show off for love interests or to earn fame.