NIGHT TRAIN TO ODESA

COVERING THE HUMAN COST OF RUSSIA'S WAR

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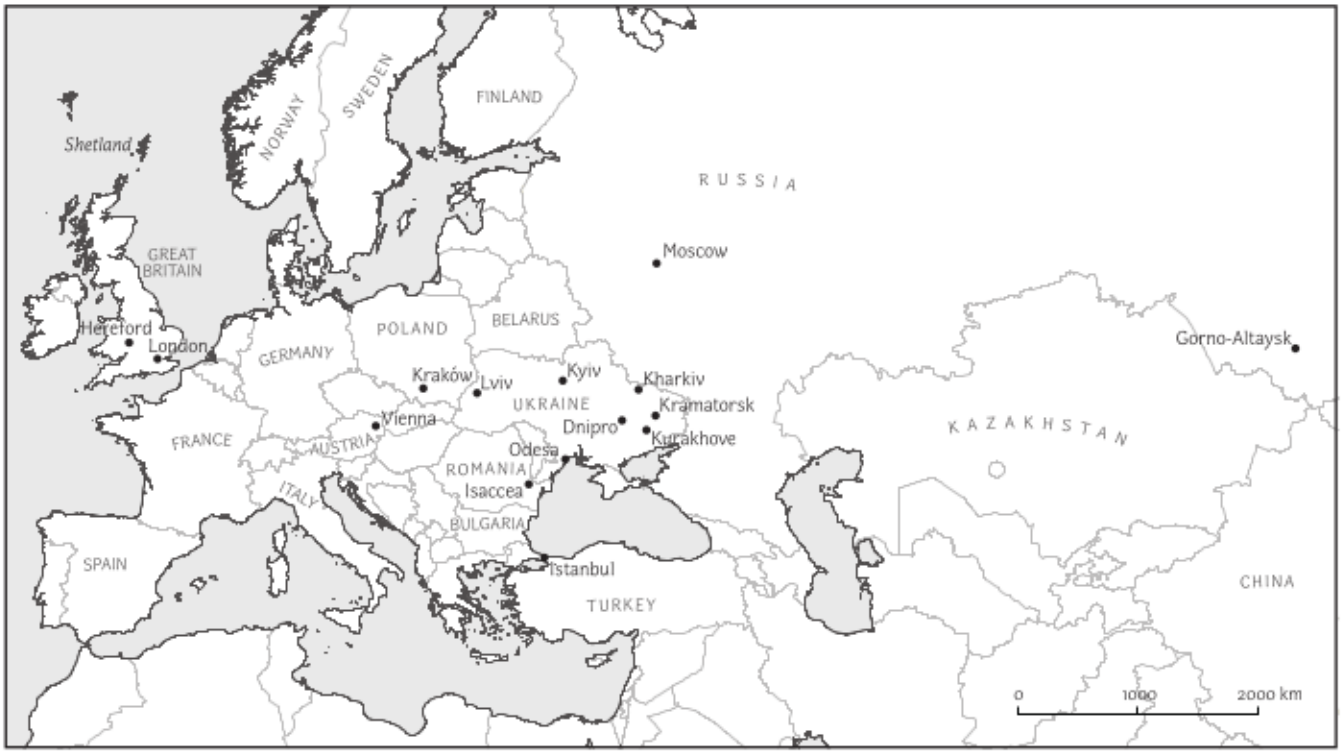
AUTHOR'S NOTE

In Ukraine I spoke with people in Russian, English, and occasionally in Surzhyk, a dialect which combines Ukrainian and Russian. In this book I use Ukrainian toponyms and names, except when people preferred to be known by the Russian version of their name. I've used Russian transliteration when describing text or words that were in Russian.

For all those fighting so hard to make things better.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PART ONE

RUSSIA TO ROMANIA

NOVEMBER 2021–MARCH 2022

CHAPTER ONE

I CRANED MY NECK to see the news programme playing on the TV at the end of the bar. It was the same fever-pitch propaganda they'd been churning out for weeks now. On every state-controlled channel, claims of 'genocide' in Donbas, claims that Ukraine was full of Nazis, ran incessantly.

And there were no other news channels in Russia now.

On my phone screen, though, I could follow, through Western outlets, the massive troop build-up, Russia's vast army moving into position on Ukraine's border. I could read the warnings of an imminent invasion. But here in Moscow, these were dismissed as hysterical Western hype.

Next to me sat Andrei, a regular at the bar. He travelled for work, and I liked to hear his stories about distant parts of Russia I hoped to see. An easy-going, quiet type.

'You know I might have to leave,' I said, still looking at the TV.

'Why would you leave?' he shot back. His voice was suddenly clipped, angry. 'Russia's not doing anything. It's all Ukraine, ramping things up, Ukrainian *Nazis*.'

I looked at him, astonished, as he went on about how terrible Ukraine was, what a badly run and corrupt country. I eventually interrupted to ask when he'd been there.

'Well, shit. Why would I go there?' he muttered.

'You've never *been* to Ukraine?'

He stared at me. 'So what? Have you?'

'Yes,' I said, wishing at this point that I *was* in Ukraine. 'It's beautiful. Nice people.'

'It's a regime,' he snapped. 'Fascists.'

It was so out of character I thought he might just be winding me up.

'Come on,' I said. 'Are you serious? That's just propaganda – you're repeating what the TV says!'

And his retort, spoken into his pint glass as he avoided my eyes, summed everything up.

'Yeah, well. Your side is propaganda too.'

It had been a rough sea crossing when I left Shetland for Russia a few months earlier. Force six southwesterly, driving rain and poor visibility. A *day o' dirt*, we'd say.

From the ferry, the lights of Lerwick, blurry through the rain-streaked porthole, glimmered and danced, then faded into the darkness. I'd waited what felt like all my adult life for this. Not leaving Shetland; I'd done that enough times. But moving to Russia.

It began as an escape, at fifteen: a high-school class I actually wanted to attend, a whole new alphabet and syntax I couldn't get enough of, a teacher who encouraged me.

Russian snared me. I'd say later that I must have spoken it in a past life; I couldn't find any other way to explain it. With a huge fundraising effort, our teacher took the small class to St Petersburg for a week, and my mind was blown. I watched the ice floes moving down the Neva, felt a fizzle of satisfaction pronouncing the instrumental case correctly to get lemon in my tea; I was fleetingly so *happy*. I decided, on that trip, that I'd come back to this place. I'd sit exams, go to university, become fluent, become a correspondent.

It was a nice dream. I did get a place in a Russian Studies

department, but the £1,500 fee for the year abroad was well beyond my means, and in our third year my classmates set off for Perm without me. I switched to Sociology, graduated, and found a job teaching English in the Ural Mountains. But weeks before I was due to leave, my mother fell ill. A year of hospitals and hospices and fading hope followed. I made many more plans to get to Russia, but they always required at least some money, and I didn't have any of that. It wasn't until my late twenties that I got into journalism, with a bursary for training in Liverpool, a local newspaper job in a small Scottish town, and a slew of credit cards to keep my head above water.

I wanted, most of all, to learn things. To learn everything. I wanted to live in other countries, especially eastern European countries, and study languages – Polish, Ukrainian, Czech – I wanted to learn about the history and culture, the art and politics of other countries – I wanted all of it, desperately.

What I did not want was to spend my days producing TV news, which is what I'd ended up doing, and which was driving me slowly and completely insane. I went to Ukraine for a week in 2018 and loved it – I'd have moved there in a flash. In 2019 I was offered a bursary for a two-year Erasmus MSc that would take me to Estonia, Ukraine, Russia and Glasgow. I was over the moon until I read the small print. The bursary had been cut back, and for nine months I'd have no income at all. I'd come across this so many times that it was hard not to be bitter about these 'opportunities' that actually required the cushion of parental cash. A little golden carrot dangled then yanked away. I had also listened to too many interviews with people who invariably spoke in the same middle-class accent and who'd made it as foreign correspondents. 'Oh, I just went,' they'd say, the sheer grating insouciance of it setting my teeth on edge.

Shortly after the Erasmus setback another chink of light

appeared. The Alfa Fellowship in Moscow was nine months long and fully-funded, and it was open to Brits, Americans and Germans who spoke Russian, early in their careers in business or journalism. It felt too good to be true when I was accepted. Things were finally, finally falling into place. Covid descended and our departure was delayed for more than a year but I waited patiently, moving up to Shetland to work on the BBC radio station. I'd waited fifteen years; this was nothing.

'Moscow? That'll be . . . *interesting*,' almost everybody said, with a raised eyebrow, when I announced the news. Or more bluntly, 'You won't do any journalism there, will you?'

We knew it might be tricky, the dozen or so who'd made it this far on the fellowship. As our departure date approached and preparatory meetings increased, we were issued with strict instructions not to get involved in politics, not to attend demonstrations or cover them; there was training in digital security and recognising surveillance. But despite the Kremlin's paranoid turn and the crackdown on dissent, there were still many foreigners working in Russia. We would simply have to tread carefully. As for the war, I don't think any of us really believed it would happen. It seemed too absurd.

It was late November 2021 when I left Shetland. It felt good to go by sea, at least the first leg. You feel the departure, the break from a very certain world, when you sail away from it slowly. The islands are, to an extent, their own world, a close-knit community of 22,000. When I was growing up on Fair Isle, the little island between Orkney and Shetland, it really was my whole world, a place where I felt deeply known and rooted – but living on mainland Shetland had come to feel like that too, in part due to working for the local BBC station, broadcasting to all those kitchens and living rooms at teatime every day. To

some newcomers Shetland feels stifling, and certainly during the pandemic we'd been more cut off than usual, but it's not insular. The long history of islanders travelling far and wide stretches back many centuries – a seafaring place with connections all over the world. Almost everyone goes away. Most return in the end. So my going to Moscow was not particularly unusual, except perhaps for the timing.

Moscow was slushy with grey ice when I arrived a few days later, the temperature just starting to drop below zero. Soon it would plummet, lacing my eyelashes with frost and sending me skidding across the black ice.

I tried to find my bearings, to understand the mood of Moscow. Other cities have a character, as if trying to communicate something. I came to feel that Moscow is indifferent. It is a machine, too vast to comprehend, on a scale which long ago exceeded the human. Not only because of its sprawling size – a veritable super-city – but the size of everything *within* it, the sense that much of its cityscape is the fevered dream of an insane tyrant, a man who thought he was creating the world anew, starting on the Moskva River. Stalinism seems here more vivid and grotesque, more pompous and enormous, than anywhere else in the dictator's former empire. It is exemplified in that strange combination of prissy grandeur and overbearing cruelty of the famous Seven Sisters, those hulking, wedding-cake skyscrapers. And yet I'd stand transfixed below them, hating them, unable to tear my eyes away.

I felt like a speck. The traffic, thundering across six lanes, would slow reluctantly to a halt, and I'd watch old ladies hobble fast to reach the other side of this chasm before the green light started to flash and the cars revved harshly across the striped lines. My bus would hurtle down to the vast expanse of Lubyanka Square, flanked by the hulking headquarters of the security services

which have terrorised the population in various guises for more than a century.

The scale of Moscow can of course be beautiful, if unsettling. From the Sparrow Hills, with the towering sci-fi symmetry of the state university behind and the city spread out icy below, it is a pinch-yourself wonder. But traces of an older city, one of people-sized streets and charm, are hard to find. Eroded by the bombast of Soviet planning and hubris, old Moscow was then further butchered by the unfettered gangster capitalism that followed the fall of the Soviet Union, a period of terrible poverty, corruption, and architectural crimes which made the city uglier and harsher; gave parts of it a kind of *Bladerunner* aesthetic. Grey and forbidding tall buildings were inserted onto the cityscape, with glass-fronted American sports bars at the bottom and old people in rags begging outside.

All the talk when I arrived was of 'foreign agents' – *inoagenty*. The Kremlin published a weekly blacklist of the people it had deemed as being under foreign influence, often journalists and activists. Those listed would have to include a long screed of text in screaming capital letters on every public statement they made, even personal comments on Facebook. You would see little notes of congratulations on a friend's wedding accompanied by a block of ridiculous text: 'THIS MATERIAL WAS CREATED OR DISTRIBUTED BY A FOREIGN MEDIA PERFORMING THE FUNCTIONS OF A FOREIGN AGENT.'

It was farcical, but everyone affected knew this was no joke; things were only moving in one direction. One morning, riot police lined the streets, rows and rows of them silent behind metal shields. Down in the metro, dark-uniformed policemen with their cartoonish peaked caps scanned the faces and phones of likely suspects. Commuters reacted as though nothing was

happening, as if they literally could not see the police. I walked to the other end of the platform, out of their sight, and asked someone what was going on. He just stared at me and edged away.

I recalled something a young man said to me on a short visit in 2016, about the uneasy and unspoken pact made after the huge 2011–12 protests were crushed by police. Mass rallies were over, protest criminalised – but Moscow was made more pleasant, with art galleries and amenities, and rising living standards for the middle classes. 'Now we just get on with things,' my acquaintance, who'd taken part in the protests, had muttered. 'Maybe it's fine.'

Few would be so cynically explicit: for wealthy Muscovites life was good, the city centre sparkling, champagne flowing freely. And this was true not only for native Russians but also for the (admittedly now diminished) contingent of foreigners. They could live like little kings here. With some honourable exceptions I found the expats pretty unpleasant: arrogant, rude about Russians, and used to getting everything they wanted. The city's massive underclass of migrants from central Asia, crisscrossing the icy streets day and night on delivery bikes, could bring them anything – '*Anything*', a young American man stressed to me, eyes wide.

The kindness and sincerity I'd known in Russia before were there, though, if you dug a bit. An old friend, a brilliant artist, was still in Moscow, trying to use art to force society to reflect on its darkness, trying to build hope and decency. She was a conscientious and sweet person who felt powerless to stop what was happening in her country, and she wasn't alone. There was the wry affection of my Russian teachers, proud Muscovite women in their fifties, who helped us settle in. And at the Anglican church one evening, as I drank tea after the service, two women swooped in: one towering over me, the other no taller than a child. They introduced themselves as Nina and

Tanya, and we talked for a long time, about poetry and God and nature. They sparkled with that Slavic combination of humour, intellect and disarming warmth.

Nina took my face in both her hands as we said goodbye: 'Zhenya, Zhenya! How glad we are to meet you!'

It was the most intense little moment of love in an otherwise trying week, and I walked through the slush back to my solitary room, glowing. But I must have taken the number down wrong. I never managed to find them again.

I so often thought, during these strange months in Moscow, of Peter Pomerantsev's phrase, 'Nothing is true and everything is possible.' Although the book of this title was written about the more hedonistic, oil-boom years in Russia, it still perfectly captured what I kept coming up against: a seemingly infinite cynicism. While in 2016 we had thrown around the term 'post-truth' as we grappled with Trump and Brexit and armchair conspiracy theorists, here in Moscow it seemed deeply ingrained. In a lecture on Russian history – our fellowship began with three months of studying – one afternoon in a hot airless room, a former minister turned professor provided a real insight into the mindset of those in charge of Russia today. The wild fantasy, the twisting of history, the paranoia and insecurity; it was all there.

The picture he painted was of a uniquely cohesive and harmonious society in which not a single ethnic or religious minority had ever been mistreated. I heard this claim all the time, and it was extraordinary and ridiculous given that both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union were deeply expansionist, ruling territories that covered nearly a sixth of the world's surface, won through centuries of violence and annexation.

But we were being corrected.

'No religious wars were ever unleashed on Russian territory!' he

said, jabbing a finger for emphasis. 'Russia has *never* implemented a forceful assimilation policy, never destroyed the ethnic and cultural identities of peoples whose territories became part of the Russian state.'

There were, he conceded briefly, deportations of minorities like the Crimean Tatars, under Stalin. 'Deportations aren't an honourable part of our history.' We moved swiftly on.

It was the touchiness of people who put forward these arguments that struck me most. They'd lash back against criticism of Russia *before you even made it*; you could sit there silently, raise one eyebrow, and let it unfold. 'You say we had no referendum in Crimea,' the professor blustered later, as the daylight faded outside and the stifling classroom air got that bit more tense, 'but what did *you* do in Kosovo? There was no referendum there, whereas we had 97 per cent in favour!'

This is rubbish, but it didn't matter – he knew it was rubbish. It was a game: someone lies to your face, knowingly, with a smirk, and waits for you to take the bait.

'*You* invaded Iraq!' he crowed, looking triumphantly around the room, arms folded. I knew we'd get to this trump card sooner or later.

'Who, me? What, personally?' I quipped, an attempt to lighten the mood, but the truth was this stuff really annoyed me: I'd marched against the Iraq war; I wasn't a champion of the British state by any stretch of the imagination. Christ, I wasn't even that keen on my own country being *part* of the British state. But it was pointless. Never argue with a finger-jabber, I remembered, too late.

Meanwhile, the professor was ending with a 'topical' point. 'The Ukrainian government talks of colonisation,' he said, contemptuously, 'but Krushchev was Ukrainian!' He looked pleased with this. (It is also not true.)

'Anyway,' he finished lamely, suddenly bored, 'but what happened, happened.' And that was that.

Crimea, colonialism, the Russian empire – the list of topics that couldn't be discussed without a defensive, furious argument was long. Another was 'those so-called LGBTs, of whom we have none in Russia', as one of my teachers put it. Also off the table was anything to do with the Second World War, linked inextricably to the next looming war, which was simply another noble fight against fascism. That didn't make any logical sense, and it didn't have to; only the emotional resonance mattered. And there were bucketloads of that.

My naive and wildly optimistic plan on arrival in Moscow had been to persuade the editor of a famous investigative newspaper to let me join their staff for the six-month internship period of my programme, which would start in March 2022. In high school I'd followed the work of *Novaya Gazeta*'s correspondent Anna Politkovskaya. She was murdered in 2006 but the independent newspaper was still going somehow. Working there, even briefly as an intern, was my longest-held dream.

But I'd waited too long to get here. You could feel the last gasp of anything independent, a slow strangulation. People were becoming wary of Western journalists. Even writing something as innocuous as a good-news story about a foster village I'd always wanted to visit was now impossible; initially keen, the charity changed their minds. They wrote to me, stiffly formal. 'In the current political situation, we don't want any articles from you.' I tried not to hear the 'you' being stressed, but I could understand why it would be. Especially for charities with ties to the West, staying off the 'foreign agent' list was the main priority.

The danger of surveillance, as well as the unspoken rules and limits we shouldn't cross, were constant topics among foreigners

at least. Russians, though, didn't want to talk about any of this. Just as people pointedly didn't look up at the looming Lubyanka building; just as shoppers ignored the policemen in balaclavas surrounding some minor protest.

At a party, after a fair amount of whisky, my neighbour at the table jerked his head to indicate a sullen, strange man who'd been sitting alone throughout the festivities, eyeballing everyone and sipping sparkling water. 'His dad was KGB,' my new friend whispered, 'and he didn't fall far from the tree.'

It was hard to distinguish paranoia from reality. Not because, as an older woman asserted one day, I was brainwashed into believing bad things about Russia, but because of the small, throwaway comments, the little gestures, the conversations that abruptly ended when the wrong topic came up.

A gregarious Muscovite I knew, who vehemently opposed the government, was holding forth in his flat one afternoon about the corruption surrounding him, the death of civic society and the looming war with Ukraine.

'I'll go and fight,' he insisted, eyes alight, 'on the Ukrainian side.'

I hesitated for a minute, wondering how, and whether, to phrase what I wanted to say.

'Look – you have a lot of Western visitors, you say all this stuff . . . Aren't you worried they're listening to you?'

It was a selfish question, in part; I was worried I was in a bugged flat, talking about opposition politics, which I was absolutely not allowed to be doing.

He paused for a moment and then made this small gesture I'd seen others do: a little flick of the eye, a backwards glance to a corner of the room.

'I don't care any more,' he spat.

A few weeks later, when I was no longer in the country, I heard

he'd been arrested at a protest against the war, and later released. Writing to me afterwards, he gleefully related how he'd sung the Ukrainian national anthem in the police wagon that conveyed him to the station. Nothing has changed since Soviet times, my wayward friend was always saying, 'except now it's worse'.

Late February 2022. The snow had started to melt. I walked a small, flatulent dog around the half-frozen slosh covering Petrovsky Park. I was house-sitting, happy to escape the four blank walls of my bedsit. It was a strange limbo: no point in planning anything, no idea what the next day would bring, but at the same time, I was in a sort of idiotic denial. There couldn't possibly be a war. Could there?

The state TV channels were showing footage of 'grateful' refugees – confused and terrified Ukrainians – disembarking from trains in Russia, being handed soup and tea, little children and old women from Donetsk, escaping what the anchors said was shelling by the Ukrainian side. The *casus belli* on repeat: *genocide, genocide, genocide*.

'I feel sick, all the time,' a friend said, as we messaged late at night. It wasn't just us; I saw, online, the posts of many anti-war Russians I'd met, all talking about this lingering nausea. We all watched the maps and diagrams of the troops' build-up along the border, so close to Kharkiv. I checked in with a journalist I knew there. 'We're doing as well as can be expected,' he replied, tersely. 'Forty kilometres away from all that.'

Two days later the bizarre spectacle of Putin's security-council meeting aired on TV. The small dog and I watched from the sofa. When Valentina Matviyenko, the sole woman on the council, made a tearful and nonsensical speech about genocide in Ukraine, I realised she might actually believe it. And somehow that was scarier. Bottomless cynicism is one thing, lies to suit any occasion,

but this teary woman seemed genuinely to think the claims were true.

There was no genocide; it was a lie. But that didn't matter; as someone had said to me, sniffily, that same week, 'You have your truth, we have ours.' Where can you possibly go from there?