ICWA LETTERS

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A final report delivered at the ICWA Members' and Trustees' meeting at the Cosmos Club in Washington, DC, December 1, 2001.

By Gregory Feifer

Dear guests: Peter Martin, ICWA trustees, Institute members, friends and family—thank you so much for coming. Just a couple of weeks ago, I was sitting in the back of a van heading along bumpy desert roads in Uzbekistan. I was in denial, perhaps, that two years were drawing to an end so quickly, and that I'd be here today at the end of my fellowship, summing up my experiences. And what experiences those were—but of that in a minute. I'd like to start by saying that back in Moscow, I listen a lot to the BBC, and on certain days of the week, I often happen to turn on the radio just as Alistair Cooke reads the latest installment of his "Letter from America."

Gregory Feifer speaking at the Cosmos Club, Washington, December 1, 2001

It's not that I was trying to avoid my fellowship obligation to submerge myself in Russian culture, but something unpleasant is happening in the Russian media; I'll elaborate about that also in a minute. So I was listening one morning recently when Cooke said, "You know, I had a lot of topics lined up about which to speak…" (Here my ears pricked up. I wanted to know how he did it. Having spent almost two years writing newsletters, I was always keen to "line up" good topics.) Anyway, "I had a lot of topics lined up," Cooke said." "But somehow, after September 11, they all became irrelevant." He then launched into a discourse on anthrax scares and media hype. But I couldn't help feeling that somehow anything that I, too, had previously wanted to say was also irrelevant. And in a way, it was.

Which leads me to the most important thing I'd like to say today: Everything one hears about an ICWA fellowship—at least everything I heard, and I heard quite a bit—is true. What does that have to do with Alistair Cooke? If, at any point during one's fellowship, everything suddenly feels irrelevant—even if it's not—and one feels obliged to strike out in a new direction, take up something else, then one is not only free to do so, one is compelled to do so.

An ICWA fellowship in a sense combines the best of academic and journalistic writing opportunities. On one hand, fellows are free to devote as much time and space as they desire to any topic—something almost impossible in journalism today. These days, I'm afraid, articles are increasingly cut, dumbed-down and generally reduced. On the other hand, ICWA fellows are also free to skip from topic to topic. That's usually impossible under the increasingly specialized rigors of academe. In short, ICWA fellows benefit from the best of both worlds. They are not constrained by having to sell a story or make it anything other than they want. Being able to do that for two years is a tremendous gift. It's a unique experience that changes the way one looks at things and how one writes about them. If I were to put it in one sentence, I'd say this ICWA fellow has become better able to pick out what's important to him—not to mention

what he feels to be important in the culture in which he chose to live for the last two years.

For that I'm very grateful and will be forever indebted to the trustees who picked me to become an ICWA fellow, and especially to Peter Martin. Peter, as we all know, makes ICWA the outstanding and unique organization it is. He travels the world to find candidates to apply for fellowships. He visits them again during the fellowships. He edits newsletters and gives the sort of guidance that helps the fellowship become the important experience it is. That on top of running the Institute itself—it's a tremendous task.

I'm also grateful to those who introduced me to ICWA, those who gave me encouragement and criticism along the way and to those who suffered through my often-convoluted writing. Have you followed me so far?

As I said in one of my newsletters, I first applied for a fellowship thinking I'd write about the cultural currents shaping Russia's movement toward the West following the Soviet collapse. Whatever the country's massive problems, it seemed truly to be undergoing a period—this was in the beginning of 1998—in which some of its fundamental traits were changing. I'll give you one example. For almost its entire history, Moscow ruled its far-flung regions by administrative coercion. After the Soviet collapse, the Kremlin for the first time put an end to its political pressure and began to negotiate with the regions chiefly through fiscal means. That is, through the flow of federal budget money out to the provinces and back in through taxes to Moscow. That, it seemed to me, was one of the changes that could have helped nudge the Russian juggernaut in a new direction. But little did I know what great changes to the country's path were coming. It's perhaps needless to say that the political control is back.

The first official day of my fellowship, January 1, 2000, coincided with another first day—that of Vladimir Putin's presidency. In the short period between the time I'd applied to write about Russia and the time I actually began, the country underwent a sea change. That had a serious effect on my fellowship. I still wrote about cultural currents. But I also spent much more time simply tracking the blow-by-blow developments of a period in which Russia was indeed changing, but in a different way than I'd imagined. Rather than moving toward the West, Russia seemed to be stepping back—away from the West and in the direction of its own past.

In a sense, this was natural. Russians had undergone a decade of humiliation. They were sick of looking to the West—and especially America—for models of politics, economics and technology. They were tired of overwhelming western superiority and Russian crumminess—especially when they thought things were supposed to be getting better. They pined for the glory days in which even mention of the Soviet Union made western governments shudder, if not cower. In the spring of 1999, when NATO began bombing Yugoslavia, those anguished feelings exploded in a wave of anti-western sentiment that shook the foundations of the entire society. Who can ever forget who sent the first man into space? The anger was well expressed in the gobs of paint and stones hurled by angry crowds surrounding the U.S. Embassy.

But the biggest moment of watershed came about six months earlier with the August 1998 economic crisis. It was a political event more than an economic one. And its immediate result was that Boris Yeltsin, who had almost single-handedly appointed and protected the country's much-lauded reformers, once again found himself—for the first time in a decade—fighting for his political life. It's more accurate to say that it was actually his entourage that was doing the fighting. As if matters weren't bad enough, Yeltsin himself had become a human vegetable, barely able even to walk and talk. He was often out of sight for weeks at a time.

Meanwhile, the influential few who formed his clique were intent on one thing: regaining their political ascendance. It was chiefly for this reason that the so-called reform era abruptly ended. To make a long story short, Yeltsin's so-called "Family" of insiders came up with Putin as their last hope of protecting themselves. They would have been ruined if a rival were to have been elected president in 2000.

About a month ago, I spoke to one of those insiders, Sergei Dorenko, a notorious television news-anchor who led a crucial media smear campaign against the Kremlin's rivals in 1999. "There was no such goal as, 'Hey, let's have Putin,' he told me. "I didn't even know what kind of person he was. I just knew that we had Putin, and that the other person was without question an evildoer. Without question he would have had people arrested and initiated repression." The evildoer in question was the powerful mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov, who most felt at the time would almost certainly succeed Yeltsin in the presidency.

"The Kremlin was thinking of where to flee," Dorenko told me of the state of affairs in the summer of 1999. "Actually, there was no Kremlin," he continued. "There was just a small group—a group of enthusiasts. And they were thinking of how to save themselves."

Dorenko himself was hardly blameless. As Russia's most-watched television journalist, he used his position on behalf of the Kremlin to issue a stream of vitriol and libel at Luzhkov and his allies during the 1999 parliamentary election campaign. Almost singlehandedly, Dorenko lowered the level of Russian journalism, making sure it would become a political tool above all else. He was instrumental in bringing Putin to power by appealing to the masses' basest emotions. He broadcast artfully edited clips putting Luzhkov and his ally, former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, in the worst light. At the time, Primakov was the country's most popular politician. But at the end of Dorenko's series of 15 programs, which he dubs "my fifteen silver bullets," the Kremlin opposition's public-opin-

ion ratings were in the single digits. Not that Luzhkov and Primakov deserve any praise for their own campaign tactics or their plans for Russia's future. It's just that the Yeltsin cadres desperate to remain in the Kremlin, fought dirtier.

Dorenko also told me a lot about his patron and close friend, the controversial tycoon Boris Berezovsky, who was at the time the Kremlin's chief backroom power broker. Whether one believes him or not, Dorenko said Berezovsky was the only one of the inner circle who was confident of victory. He urged everyone else on with the rallying cry, "We'll screw those bastards!" which echoed in the Kremlin boardrooms. Ultimately, Dorenko said, it was he and Berezovsky who were chiefly responsible for Putin's rise. "Boris dealt with the elite," he told me, "and I, the electorate. It was that simple."

During that bitter election battle, Putin oversaw the beginning of a brutal new war in Chechnya. It was a popular move that—together with his hard-line rhetoric vowing to "liquidate" whom he called "terrorists and bandits"—made his approval ratings soar. An emerging cult of personality meanwhile formed around the future president. Everyone from major politicians to well-known actors to teenagers, who were herded into a new Sovietesque youth organization, jumped on the bandwagon. To criticize Putin meant you weren't a patriot.

Once in office, Putin quickly moved to consolidate power. In the name of bringing law and order to Russia's Yeltsin-era anarchic chaos, he worked to strengthen centralized authority—that is, his own. He cut back the control of powerful regional elites in a series of changes to the Constitution. State prosecutors, meanwhile, attacked the so-called oligarchs, the handful of hugely influential businessmen who had made fortunes during Yeltsin's giveaway privatization. Putin also cracked down on the free press and civil society. Dorenko, incidentally, was but one of the casualties, fired from television after having criticized Putin for his mishandling of the Kursk nuclear submarine accident. Berezovsky is now in self-imposed exile in France.

"Berezovsky kept calling him Volodya," Dorenko told me, speaking of the familiar form of Putin's name, Vladimir. "But he didn't realize he wasn't 'Volodya' anymore, that he was a person behind whom hung a double-headed eagle representing a centuries-old empire." Two years later, are Putin's repressive political actions what his presidency has been all about? In a nutshell, yes.

Behind the torrent of speculation about his economic reforms and his newest flirtation with Washington, much of Putin's real reform was carried out by increasing the arbitrary powers of the hordes of bureaucrats and law enforcers. They're the ones who make up the state infrastructure. Once again, fear of punishment brought people into line—precisely because it was unclear what the laws really were. Bribery and corruption of all kinds became not a vestige of the Soviet system, but a central part of the new Putin regime, in a country he vowed to make powerful once again. But that power is deceptive. Most Russians live in increasing poverty. In one region last summer, for example, hospital workers were even paid in manure —and some of them were apparently happy to get it.

The economy, which is now receiving accolades for growing while the rest of the world sinks into recession, has improved chiefly due to high oil prices and the devalued ruble that came with the 1998 economic crisis. These factors will surely change and eventually force another crisis. It's amazing to me how quickly the 1998 meltdown and its lessons have been forgotten. Especially since the economy hasn't essentially reformed.

The regime, after all, remains the same. As in all previous cycles in Russian history, the system is seeking stability after a period of great flux. It's returning to a traditional way of doing things, where decisions are taken by a group of political élites behind closed doors and rhetoric is used to smokescreen anyone who would pose a threat—including the West, with its annoying talk of human rights and economic transparency.

Then came September 11. The tragedy did a lot to change Russia's image in the world. As in many in other parts of the globe, Russians were shaken by the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. On top of the incalculable layers of physical, emotional and economic damage the mass murders wreaked, it was ripples of the symbolic that reverberated in Moscow. Reactions went so far as to override—temporarily perhaps—the negative attitudes many Russians had begun to hold toward America. For the few who could afford to travel to the perceived nexus of capitalist prosperity—and for the masses who dreamed of it—the Twin Towers in their stark massiveness continued to represent a geographic common space Russians shared with other citizens of the world. That Russians were only recently forbidden to travel abroad meant distant parts were all the more treasured.

Hence Russians on the whole were not immune to the shockwaves set off on September 11. Here was naked evil, which, in its stark depiction, instantly set off a philosophical shift. In the crudest terms, if the United States instantly grew up, so did Russia. Nowhere was that more clearly reflected than in the words and actions of Putin himself.

By pledging intelligence cooperation and giving his consent for U.S. troops to be deployed in Uzbekistan—part of Russia's jealously guarded sphere of influence—Putin acted against the will of a large number of political elites. "Americans—we are with you," he said immediately after the attack—to huge praise abroad. It was a not-insignificant Nixon-in-China-style risk. That much is clear to all. But as the U.S. began bombing Afghanistan, Putin made other moves that reflected even more deeply a wide-ranging change in his use of rhetoric in foreign policy tactics.

After Ukraine ludicrously denied shooting down a Russian airliner last September, Putin didn't censure his

southern neighbor. Earlier, he might well have used the event to further assert Russia's influence over Ukraine. More significant in terms of his new restraint, Putin said he wouldn't stop Georgia's secession from the loose alliance of former Soviet republics called the Commonwealth of Independent States. Georgia's President Eduard Shevardnadze threatened that action after the onset of hostilities in the country's breakaway region of Abkhazia. That conflict threatens to spark the renewal of a civil war put on hold seven years ago.

The real situation in Abkhazia remains unclear. But the significance of Putin's words cannot be overemphasized. At any time before September 11, these issues could have immediately begun diplomatic stand-offs. Instead, Putin seems to have learned to use rhetoric to Russia's long-term advantage rather than engage in short-term tactical arguments meant to make up for Russia's lost status in world politics.

But has Russia really grown up? Or is it simply longing to do so? Is it acting in a way that may soon bring harsh disillusionment and a further deterioration in relations with western states? I recently spoke with a Russian official whose words indicated to me that what the country is doing today might be nothing new. The official praised Putin's cooperation with the U.S. He glowed over the president's magnanimous agreement to allow for civilian casualties in a U.S. attack on Afghanistan. Putin went further than any other European leader in showing his solidarity with Washington, the official said. What about Tony Blair, I asked? I received glowering silence in reply, followed by a sermon. Russia knows what it's like to live under the threat of terrorism, I was told. And America has finally emerged from its naiveté to come inevitably closer to Moscow's position on this and other matters of importance.

The official's paternalistic statements were upbeat, not so much about the new closeness between the U.S. and Russia in the wake of a tragedy that struck at all peace-loving people. The official was actually excited by the perceived magnanimity with which Russia is helping its onetime rival. (I must also say that even those words aped the Kremlin line. They seemed meant to display the official's loyalty to the regime when he might have rather sent the Yanks to Hell.)

In short, Russia is savoring what it sees as America's humiliation. It's also enjoying the glory of being needed by the West. But I'm afraid that once long-standing long-term interests and frictions and familiar feelings of envy and suspicion inevitably emerge from the terrible shadow of September 11, Russia may once again be heading for disappointment and disillusionment—the same kind that followed the initial euphoria of the early 1990s, when Russians also saw themselves as respected new partners in the global community.

September 11 has actually helped distract Russians and the rest of the world from what the country desperately needs if it is in fact to become a productive member of the global community. Russia really needs social reform. It must rebuild decaying infrastructure and reinforce institutions that would safeguard citizens' rights. Instead, the state continues to legitimize those benefiting from gangster-style economics and the plunder of the country's raw materials. For years, Berezovsky's Sibneft oil company, for example, claimed to be making no profits, while everyone knew its impenetrable network of offshore companies were funneling billions abroad.

But I don't want to end on a note of gloom. I'm happy to say that during the past two years of tremendous change in Russia, I, at least, benefited by being able to research and write about whatever caught my fancy. I spoke to artists and television personalities. I traveled to the Arctic wastes of northern Siberia, and the former Soviet republics of Georgia and Ukraine. I was able to witness firsthand the final days of Russia's only independent national television station, NTV. I was also able simply to report on Moscow's mood swings as short, lazy summers turned into long, grey winters.

As I said earlier, I also recently returned from Uzbekistan, where I went to observe the changes wrought by September 11. Over hundreds of years, interaction between Muscovy's Slavs and the nomadic Turkic groups who inhabited the steppes south of their forests has contributed as much as anything else to the formation of Russian trade patterns, politics and culture. I found Uzbekistan's post-Soviet regime, increasingly and depressingly authoritarian, is now using the American presence on its soil to its advantage in the tangled geopolitical game it plays with Moscow. What I really mean to say with all this is that my ICWA experience has been an amazing one.

After my two years, people ask me, "Surely there's something 'good' going on? Surely there's some improvement?" There is, to be sure—although I'm always wary of the perception that Russia must inevitably be moving toward our indisputably better way of doing things. One of the topics about which I wrote during my fellowship was the emergence of a middle class, a still-tiny but growing stratum. That group may in the future help Russia approach fundamental change, the kind the country needs to become a place of opportunity and equality, freedom and respect for human life—and above all, rule of law.

For the time being, I'm reminded of a very Russian way of looking at things—one that holds that a pessimist is someone who says things are going to get worse, while an optimist says they *can't* get any worse. Alas, in Russia's long history, the pessimists have often been right. Am I grateful that my two years in Moscow, coming when they did, have given me insight into why? Well, I've yet to figure it out, but believe me, the ambiguity takes nothing away from my gratitude for the fellowship.

Thank you very much.