

## BIOGRAPHY

# A tour of the Wild East

An 'erudite, shocking' guide to a hundred years of Russian history

**RORY MACLEAN**

**THE LONG SONG OF TCHAIKOVSKY STREET**

A Russian adventure  
**PIETER WATERDRINKER**  
 Translated by Paul Evans  
 416pp. Scribe. £18.99

**O**N MY FIRST VISIT to Moscow, I met one of Lenin's embalmers. "When I began, the body was in a poor state", said Styopa, whose expertise was the use of electricity. Skin grafts and a new partial-vacuum glass sarcophagus had helped to inhibit decay, but Styopa's shock treatment had reversed it. "Once every two or three months, a high-voltage charge was applied to keep up the tone. But the first time we tried it I overestimated the power needed. Lenin suddenly sat up from the table, his arms shook, and his lips started to quiver. I thought he was going to speak. It was quite a shock. After that, we reduced the voltage."

This was late 1989, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when Eastern Europe was in a tumultuous state. Fifty years of totalitarianism had ended almost overnight. The Soviet Union - although lagging behind its former vassals - was on track to transformation. Into this brave new age stumbled Pieter Waterdrinker, then a twenty-six-year-old Dutch student at a loss as to what to do with his life. Until a mysterious priest knocked on his door in Zandvoort and asked him to deliver 7,000 Bibles to the USSR.

Thirty years later, Waterdrinker - by this time a *De Telegraaf* foreign correspondent, novelist and enthusiastic drinker - was living with his Russian wife on Tchaikovsky Street in St Petersburg, and on the cusp of giving up writing fiction. "Next year, it'll be a hundred years since the outbreak of the Russian revolution", his publisher then emailed him. "We were having a bit of a brainstorming session and we thought wouldn't it be nice if you wrote a book about it? Not too weighty though. Try to keep it personal." The result is *The Long Song of Tchaikovsky Street*, a disarming, erudite, shocking, laugh-out-loud Dutch bestseller, which has been enthusiastically

translated by the Welsh poet Paul Evans.

Waterdrinker spins out and back through bitter Soviet history, leavening his time travel with unbelievable yet totally believable personal experiences.

He reminisces about being a Wild East tour guide side-lining in contraband as communism and the rouble collapsed (six cans of imported Carlsberg lager bought 300 litres of diesel). He recounts saving a demented tsarist searching for an elegant drapery shop that had closed seventy years earlier, and being a confidante of a Red Army colonel who promised to help him with any problem "as long as there wasn't a war on". He cosies up to Siberian scientists who plan to defraud Germany and invites his lover into a hotel bathtub brimming with Georgian champagne (120 bottles does the job). He witnesses the Maidan revolution in Kyiv and the seizure of Crimea by Moscow's "little green men".

Chronicling the writing of the book helps to propel a conversational narrative that "exhaustively" mines his own biography. "I'm not making anything up, why would I?", he confesses in a frank and likeable voice. "I'm beyond fiction." Prescient diary entries written in 1917 by first-hand observers of the Revolution, above all the Symbolist writer Zinaida Gippius, ground the book, as do truths about Stalin's despotism. On his journey to the present day, Waterdrinker comes to feel for "the deceived, over whom the filth of history was washing afresh". His father-in-law recalls the many times he'd been interrogated by the KGB, saying: "For my whole life, I've been surrounded by lies... By types like that president of ours now... Now he's once again a believer, namely a believer in the lie that he created himself. The lie that he's God - the 'czar' who can steal left and right without punishment".

In the haunted twenty-first-century kleptocracy, ordinary Russians confront "a world of unremitting want, fear, silence, and lies". Waterdrinker blames their tragedy on the "apostle of death" Lenin, "a psychopath riddled with misanthropy and spite" who killed the hope of Russian democracy in 1917 with his refusal to co-operate with the Provisional Government. But it is only by extension and implication that he also criticizes the present, delusional occupant of the Kremlin (never named), whose

restoration of imperial habits has brought war to Europe as well as resurrected grotesque differences between rich and poor. Virulent patriotism is Putin's new ideology as once again an ominous schism opens between the "useful idiots" who carry out orders and those who hold real power. As Russian soldiers die in Ukraine, it really does seem that Lenin may be about to sit up from the table, his arms shaking and lips quivering, with the seeds sown for a new revolution. ■

*Rory MacLean's latest book Pravda Ha Ha: Truth, lies and the end of Europe, retraces the journey he made in Stalin's Nose thirty years on*

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St Petersburg, 1990