



Margaret Winchell. *Armed With Patience: Daily Life in Post-Soviet Russia.* Tenafly, N.J.: Hermitage Publishers, 1998. 257 pp. \$14.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55779-109-2.



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Published on H-Russia (August, 1999)

Russia As It Really Is

In Margaret Winchell's book *Armed With Patience: Daily Life in Post-Soviet Russia*, we have a worthy successor to what Hedrick Smith's *The Russians* (and *The New Russians*) and Robert G. Kaiser's *Russia: The People and the Power* did for the final years of the Soviet Union. Quite simply, *Armed With Patience* is the best treatment I've seen of daily life, and much more, in the Russia of the 1990s.

Although the scope of *Armed With Patience* is more limited than Smith's and Kaiser's books, in many ways the result is more satisfying. Winchell's book comes from her experiences of living in Russia with her husband and daughter for two nine-month stays, the first in 1992-93, the second in 1996-97.

Armed With Patience brings authenticity and richness that can only come from Russian friends, speaking the language, and immersion in Russian life. Winchell is a Slavic librarian at the University of Kansas where her husband, Gerald Mikkelson, is a professor of Russian language and literature. During both stays they lived in St. Petersburg and traveled extensively within the country. Her language fluency and solid grounding in Russian

history and culture, especially literature, reinforce keen skills of curious, respectful, and articulate observation.

Winchell's book contains twelve chapters plus introduction and epilogue. The chapters are organized by topics. The first ten cover a broad array: living with hyperinflation; shopping; challenges of operating a business in the new Russia; food; health; stresses of daily living; children; the arts, literacy and literature; and spirituality. The penultimate chapter, "Paradise Lost: The Crimea," provides a cultural contrast with the last chapter, "Paradise Returning? St. Petersburg."

Throughout the book, a judicious sprinkling of details illuminates general points. In the chapter on shopping, she describes the rituals of waiting in line, Russian style. Colds are treated with raspberry jam dissolved in hot tea and with mustard plasters. Exteriors of frequently ugly buildings contrast with interiors, with the warmth and hospitality of apartments.

The chapter titled "Biznes" illustrates her approach. It opens with an introductory section on privatization and joint ventures before turning to small business. Winchell

then takes us to Yury and Inna's convenience store and Lyuba's dress shop in St. Petersburg, plus Nadya and Sergey's English school in Irkutsk and the mitten makers of Stary Izborsk. The chapter closes with interpretive comments, followed by a delightful snapshot of a young bottle-collecting entrepreneur.

Winchell draws our attention to abundant ironies: Well-meaning foreign aid results in the United States sending soybean oil, rather than the sunflower oil to which Russians are accustomed, in containers of the wrong size. Germany, for its part, sends ice cream ("What flavor?" "Humanitarian.") to the country that makes exceptional ice cream in abundance (p. 15). She also points out, with striking effect, much of what we Americans take for granted. She holds up a mirror so that we can look at ourselves: at our excesses, choices, waste (portions overly large), and comfort.

Armed With Patience tells us about the Russia of this decade from the perspective of an insider (who, of course, is also an outsider). Winchell's American eye is sympathetic and loving, reflective and instructive. Russia "has much to teach us, if only we are willing to learn" (p. 254). Moreover, Winchell has given us a book that is dead accurate. It goes beyond the headlines and beyond the limitations of Western reporting.

We see Russians as they really are: like Americans in some ways to be sure, yet at the same time quite different. The pages of the book capture the spirit and flavor of their pride, skepticism, warmth and hospitality, love of children, fatalism, and apathy. We see the Russians' sense of inferiority, the humiliation of going to bed one night as a superpower, only to find on waking up the next morning that their superpower status has vanished.

The strengths of the book come first from the insightful incision of its observations, which gain additional impact through the ties it draws with the history and culture of the Soviet Union and Russian Empire. The details—smells, tastes, sounds, colors—help draw powerful images. Proverbs and anecdotes add further richness. Winchell writes with grace and an economical freshness of phrasing. A few words say a great deal, and say it in a way that invites us to remember. For example, Winchell writes, "One of the few areas in which Soviet Russia regularly overfulfilled its quota on a magnificent scale was the production of stress" (p. 86), and "Pay phones were plentiful; pay phones that worked were as scarce as penthouse apartments" (p. 95).

Does the book have any weaknesses? Of course. I wish there had been an index. By the time I got interested in Isolda Ivanovna, I had forgotten where I first met her. I wish that Winchell had presented the bleak situation of public health in Russia more fully than she does. Because the book is based on two different stays, separated by four years, in a fast-changing country, I frequently wanted to know when a given observation took place. Sometimes Winchell tells us, sometimes she doesn't tell us and it doesn't matter—and sometimes she doesn't tell us, and it does matter. When did they travel to the Crimea?

But the weaknesses are modest. *Armed With Patience* is a superb and important book, a little jewel. Even though it ends in the spring of 1997, Winchell has set the stage so true that the reader has no trouble filling in the missing time from then to now. I highly recommend the book as a supplemental text for twentieth-century Russian history courses and for the increasing number of courses on Russian culture. *Armed With Patience* would nicely complement Genevra Gerhart's *The Russian's World: Life and Language* (Harcourt Brace and Company, New York and London, 2d ed., 1995). I recommend the book as well for the general reader and for the person about to make her or his first trip to Russia.

Before closing, let me address the matter of how to obtain a copy. Few bookstores carry Hermitage books. The best way to get one is direct from the publisher. Hermitage Publishers does list *Armed With Patience* in its current print catalog. In its electronic catalog on the Web (<http://member.aol.com/yefimovim>), however, the book may be found only under "browse by title," and under neither the "search" nor "browse by author" features.

Reading *Armed With Patience* was a treat. It took me away from the world of tourists and journalists. It took me back to my cousin Katya and to our dear friends Ivan and Yevdokiya. I once again sat and talked with them at the small table in the small kitchen. I could smell the steaming borsch, garnished with its dollop of sour cream and snipping of fresh dill, and taste the bite of super-chilled vodka. Through the book, I could also hear the click-click-click of the abacus and see the muted pastels of the Russian city.

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Citation: Daniel A. Panshin. Review of Winchell, Margaret, *Armed With Patience: Daily Life in Post-Soviet Russia*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. August, 1999.

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