RUSSIA: The Land of Lost Potential

Russia is a huge country of great beauty and many natural resources, but somehow it has never been able to establish good governance or a thriving economy. As a tourist in Russia I sought to understand what life was like in this great but tragically underdeveloped country.

Under the Romanov tsars, starting with Peter the Great, Russia made enormous contributions to European culture with its great musicians, writers, artists and ballet dancers as well as its beautiful churches and opulent palaces. Unfortunately, this grandeur was built upon a system of serfdom where impoverished peasants were bound to the estates of the nobility.

However, under the reign of Alexander II (1855–1871) the serfs were freed and a series of reforms made it look like Russia might evolve into a constitutional monarchy. Alas, Alexander was assassinated, and the last two Romanov tsars opposed reform and tried to bring back the old order. As a result, Russia lurched from a revolution hijacked by the Bolsheviks, to dictatorship under Stalin, to failed attempts at increasing democracy and civic freedom under Mikhail Gorbachev, to what is turning into a second dictatorship under Putin and his ruling oligarchs. Due to its tragic history the Russia has never gotten good government right.

On our trip through Russia we saw so many wonderful art treasures, visited gilded palaces that matched the grandeur of Versailles, and saw beautiful multi-domed churches. In many cases the Russian government under Vladimir Putin has restored these treasures from Nazi destruction at great expense. This is good for the pride of the Russian people in their heritage and as a source of badly needed tourist dollars. I could not begin to describe the art and architecture in the space here. Instead I would like to describe what I learned about everyday life in modern Russia. My source for this was mostly conversations with our three tour escorts who, paid by the Viking Company, were quite happy to discuss their lives and give us their opinions about just about everything Russian.

First of all, our escorts all supported Putin because although the standard of living in Russia may seem poor by U.S. standards, under Putin it has greatly improved since the dark days of the 1980’s–1990’s. Our guides explained that Russia had great difficulty making the transition from communism to capitalism. Mikhail Gorbachev’s attempts at economic and political reform from 1985–1991 resulted in a total collapse of the economy. After years of a centrally controlled economy, most Russians had no idea how to start businesses and survive in a competitive economy. State-owned factories shut down, especially in the rural areas, putting many out of work.

Under communism people were given tiny, sometimes communal apartments in huge ugly

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complexes that still tower over the cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg like great vertical honeycombs. Many are very shabby and in disrepair. When the transition to capitalism occurred the apartments were turned over to their tenants, most of whom were also given small plots of land in the country where they could grow some vegetables and build small summer houses called dachas. Under Gorbachev food was so scarce that it was these small gardens that kept many from going hungry.

Today the economy is recovering and more huge apartment complexes are being built in the cities. Moscow is one of the most expensive cities in the world to live in and boasts many high-end shopping malls (for those who have the money) and terrible traffic jams as more and more can afford cars. However, the purchase price of apartments is very high, about $200,000 for a two-bedroom unit, and the average family lives in only about 850 square feet.

When asked about the “average income” our guide laughed and said that incomes were so unequal it would be impossible to state an average. While Russia boasts a bevy of billionaires, many struggle just to get by. We did not see any single-family homes in or near the cities. Everyone lives in these large apartment complexes. In the small rural town we visited there were single-family homes that were very old and small—although always neat and clean—with electricity and running water. Everyone has a television and a cell phone. There is a safety net of small pensions given by the government at the age of 55. The healthcare system is free for all, but woefully inadequate.

Although unemployment is listed officially at around 6%, we saw little evidence of manufacturing. Surrounding the cities were miles and miles of shabby apartment buildings and abandoned factories. The problem is that when it transitioned to capitalism Russia needed a large infusion of capital to start businesses and factories. This has not happened because foreign companies do not want to do business with Putin and the country is rife with corruption. Also Russia’s billionaire oligarchs, many of whom are rich from oil money, are siphoning their profits out of the country and not using them to rebuild the Russian economy. So while things are definitely better for the average Russian, most American economists would agree that the economy could be doing a lot better were it not for Putin and his ruling gang of oligarchs.

Our Russian guides were unaware of this and correctly credited Putin for bringing stability and some degree of economic growth to Russia. They were well educated, used the Internet freely, and felt no restrictions on their freedom of speech. I got the impression that as long as the average citizen does not pose any threat to Putin’s regime he or she is pretty free to go about their business and do and say what they please.

Overall Russia is a great place to visit for its historic sites and treasures, and life for the average citizen is improving. The tragedy of Russia is that so far it has failed to live up to its promise of the great country it could become.

Best Wishes,

Jane
Debate Watch by Cindy Ware

Join your Democratic friends to view the Republican presidential candidates debate each other as they vie for the nomination of their party. We will observe the debate Thursday, August 6, 5:45–9:00 p.m. in the Tahoe Room at the Event Center.

How far right will each speaker go to differentiate from all the others? Will any try a moderate stand? Who will embrace gay marriage or a woman’s right to choose? How far will each one take his/her desire to dismantle the Affordable Care Act or, indeed, the entire federal government?

Everyone is encouraged to bring a snack to enjoy and share with others…popcorn, nuts, pretzels, fruit, carrot/celery sticks, etc. Also bring your drinks of choice. Paper plates and cups will be provided. Hope to see you there!

The Conflict in Syria

Map sources (BBC assembled): areas of control and border crossings from the Syria Needs Analysis Project. The organization's primary source is a database of conflict incidents as recorded by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. All other geographical detail is from humanitarian organizations and Google. 2015-07-10
The August General Meeting will be held in the Tahoe Room at the Event Center on Thursday, August 27. Social hour/Town Hall will begin at 6 p.m., and the presentation will begin at 7.

Professor Fred Lawson is a Mideast expert and the Government Department head at Mills College and will discuss the crisis in Syria.

Between 1992 and 1993 he was a Fulbright lecturer in International Relations at the University of Aleppo, Syria. He is the author of Constructing International Relations in the Arab World (Stanford University Press) and Why Syria Goes to War (Cornell University Press).

Did You Know (about Syria)?

- The UN Refugee agency that tracks the number of people fleeing the conflicts in Syria reports the number has now passed 4 million, with almost half of those fleeing to Turkey. An additional 7.6 million have been displaced inside Syria. Worldwide, the number of people forced from their homes by conflicts has risen to a record 59.5 million. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reports that 12.2 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria.

- It is estimated that 35% of the population in Syria are under 15 years old, 61% are between 15 and 64, and 3.8% are over 64. The population is roughly half male, half female. The Syrian Center for Policy Research estimates that life expectancy in Syria has dropped from 79.5 years to 55.7, a drop of over 20 years.

- The New York-based nonprofit Physicians for Human Rights claims that in 2014 one medical worker was killed every other day and every four days a hospital was bombed or shelled.

- A report published in March 2015 by the Syrian Centre for Policy Research, the UN Relief & Works Agency, and the UN Development Programme states that almost two-thirds of the population is living “in extreme poverty where they were unable to secure the basic food and non-food items necessary for the survival of the household.” The report also discloses that the UN Human Development Index (HDI) is estimated to have lost 32.6 percent of its pre-conflict value, while falling in global ranking from 113th to 173rd out of 187 countries.”

Happy Birthday, Otto!

Former two-term DoR president Otto Schnupp celebrated his 90th birthday last month at a party at Hillside. Following his terms as president, Otto spent two years formatting the DoR newsletter, bridging its transition from hard copy to digital. The carrot cake was to die for!
The Feedback Forums Are Coming! by Katha Hartley

The Democrats of Rossmoor are inviting all Democrats to attend a Feedback Forum on Thursday, September 24, starting at 6 p.m. in the Event Center. Our Club wants to gain information from Democrats who live in Rossmoor about who voted or chose not to vote in the most recent election, about issues that are most important to them, their priorities, and the reasons they would vote for candidates in 2016 local, state, and national elections. Most people appreciate an opportunity to share their opinions, and in Rossmoor we’re generally not shy about voicing them.

This Feedback Forum is a way to reach out to our constituents for opinions and comment. DoR will use Feedback Forum information and outputs to inform our campaign strategies, select endorsed candidates, and communicate our priorities to other clubs in Contra Costa County and to Democratic Party leadership as it prepares local, state, and national election strategies, planning, marketing, and communications.

During the Feedback Forum, we will:
• Gather opinions, beliefs, and attitudes about issues of interest.
• Listen to the opinions of others.
• Test assumptions.
• Encourage discussion about particular topics of interest.
• Build understanding from the spontaneous combination of participant comments.
• Provide an opportunity to learn more about a topic or issue.

The Feedback Forum will last approximately two hours. We will divide our participant group into small groups of six to ten. Each person will receive a questionnaire document with space for writing. We will quickly review the main topics, allow some time to make quick notes, and then, with the guidance of small group facilitators, begin sharing answers and opinions.

Each group will have a scribe who will assist the facilitator in capturing comments and answers generated by the small group generates. After the forum, the scribe and facilitator will summarize the group results, transcribe notes, and write a summary of the group’s work.

DoR members will then analyze the summaries and look for trends, surprises, and priorities. They will write a report that will be shared a short time after the meeting with both participants and various Democratic Party organizations.

Please consider joining us for what will, we believe, prove to be an interesting evening. The Feedback Forum will provide all of us an opportunity to join with our fellow Democrats, express our thoughts in a respectful and welcoming setting, and to learn more about what we share in common—the Party of Roosevelt, Truman, Johnson, Kennedy, Carter, Clinton, and Obama. What a great legacy!

Refreshments will be served. If you have questions, you can email Katha at kathah7@msn.com.

“If by a ‘Liberal’ they mean someone who looks ahead and not behind, someone who welcomes new ideas without rigid reactions, someone who cares about the welfare of the people — their health, their housing, their schools, their jobs, their civil rights, and their civil liberties — someone who believes we can break through the stalemate and suspicions that grip us in our policies abroad, if that is what they mean by a ‘Liberal,’ then I’m proud to say I’m a ‘Liberal.’” John F. Kennedy
Nuclear Nonproliferation Factoids

• 189 nations have signed on to the 1970 Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), whose three pillars form the cornerstone of nuclear nonproliferation: disarmament, nonproliferation, and peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

• The basic bargain at the core of the NPT is that: countries with nuclear weapons will move towards disarmament, countries without nuclear weapons will not acquire them, and all countries can access peaceful nuclear technology.

• The treaty recognizes five states as nuclear-weapon states: the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and China.

• Five countries—Israel, Pakistan, India, North Korea, and South Sudan—have so far refused to sign the treaty. North Korea withdrew from the treaty in 2003. The State of Palestine has signed on.

Sunday, September 27, Dinner Meeting with the Stanford Club — Dr. Scott Sagan: Nuclear Disarmament or Nuclear Proliferation?

The Club’s September General Meeting will feature Stanford Professor Scott D. Sagan, who will speak on nuclear weapons policy. This will be a joint dinner meeting with the Stanford Club, and will be held in the Fireside Room at Gateway. Social hour will begin at 5 p.m., dinner will be served at 6, and the presentation will begin at 7.

Stanford Political Science Professor Scott Sagan holds many academic posts at Stanford, notably as co-chair of the American Academy of Arts and Science’s Global Future Nuclear Initiative. Before joining the staff at Stanford he also served as a consultant to the office of the Secretary of Defense and at the Sandia National Laboratory and the Los Alamos National Laboratory.

Professor Sagan has received numerous awards and written dozens of papers and several books, including most recently Spread of Nuclear Weapons: An Enduring Debate, which he co-authored with Kenneth N. Waltz. Among the theories he examines are the dynamics of military and civilian controls, conditions that foster instability, second-strike capability and survivability, and the role of nuclear arsenals. There will be time for questions from the audience and everyone is welcome. Those wishing to hear the presentation but not attend the dinner are welcome to do so and arrive at 7 p.m. when the presentation begins.

Please print and fill out the Dinner RSVP form on page 8, then follow the directions on the form to submit before the September 23 deadline. The cost is $30 per person and RSVP forms can always be printed from democratsOFrossmoor.org or picked up at any DoR event or in DoR’s Gateway mailbox. Please make note of the Sunday, September 27, date for the dinner.
In the last election Republican Catherine Baker and Democrat Steve Glazer were elected to the California Assembly and the California Senate, respectively. This column will follow their activities and voting records.

**Assembly Member Baker** has so far been appointed as vice chair of the Committee on Higher Education and as a member of three other committees: Business; Professions and Consumer Protection; Privacy and Consumer Protection; and Transportation.

In Transportation, Baker sponsored AB 1284, which passed both the Assembly and the Senate. If signed into law by Governor Jerry Brown, AB 1284 will bring transparency to the Toll Bridge Program Oversight Committee (TBPOC), which is responsible for construction and safety issues on the Bay Bridge. So far, despite the many construction and safety problems with the bridge, TBPOC is not required to hold open meetings and can expunge its records so that there is no record that either a meeting took place or what actions, if any, were taken. AB 1284 will end this secretive practice. Baker jointly co-sponsored SB 277, which Governor Brown signed into law 6/30/2015 and which repeals the personal exemption for child vaccinations, except with rare medical conditions.

**Between January and June 2015 Baker voted on five other important bills that passed the Assembly:**

**Baker voted in favor of two bills:**

- SB 88, signed into law 6/24/2015, authorizes extension of water supplies to public water systems and small local water systems that do not adequately provide safe drinking water.
- AB 202, signed into law 7/15/2015, requires professional sports teams to classify cheerleaders as employees, making them eligible for benefits.

**Baker voted against three bills:**

- AB 718, which would allow an individual to sleep in a car without civil or criminal penalties.
- AB 775, which would require family planning and pregnancy service providers to inform clients of certain state-funded services including, but not limited to, abortion.
- AB 1100, which would increase filing fees for ballot initiatives from $200 to $8,000.

It appears that Baker is off to a busy start standing up for the safety of children in school and employment equality for women while demonstrating her Republican proclivity to save money, even where the health of the general public is exposed. It also appears she is not willing to restrain the ability of just about anyone from forcing a vote on any wacky idea. Of course, she voted her own conscience on the abortion issue, even denying pregnant women information about the existence of state-funded services other than abortion.

As this column continues in future newsletters, we will follow Baker’s voting record with interest.
Yea and Nay Report, continued from page 7

State Senator and Democrat Steve Glazer, upon his swearing-in, immediately faced 207 bills already in committee. He has been appointed to three committees: Governmental Organization, Insurance, and Public Safety. Glazer co-sponsored and voted for SB 128, which would have authorized individuals with terminal illnesses to obtain aid-in-dying drugs (SB 128 was ultimately pulled by its author). He also co-sponsored SB 539, which would make it illegal to name any local or state owned property in California after any Confederate Officer or elected official. It would require the renaming of any that already exist by January 2017.

There were votes on 14 important bills since June 1, 2015. In addition to SB 128, Glazer voted in favor of:

- SB 4, which would expand health care coverage to undocumented immigrants.
- SB 32, which would establish greenhouse gas emission regulations.
- SB 88, signed into law 6/24/2015, authorizes extension of water supplies to public water systems and small water systems that do not adequately provide safe drinking water.
- SB 124, which would limit solitary confinement for imprisoned juveniles.
- SB 140, withdrawn at the request of its author, would have added electronic cigarettes to the definition of tobacco products as found in the law requiring licensing of the sale of tobacco products, prohibit sale to minors, and prohibit smoking electronic cigarettes wherever smoking tobacco is banned.
- SB 151, which would increase the legal smoking age from 18 to 21.
- SB 185, which would require public retirement funds to divest from investment in thermal coal companies.
- SB 277, signed into law 6/30/2015, repeals the law allowing religious belief exemptions for child vaccinations for entry into public schools.
- SB 350, which would require that the amount of energy generated by renewable energy sources be increased to at least 50% by December 31, 2030.
- SB 588, which would provide special provisions for the enforcement of judgments against employers for non-payment of wages (by collection of a levy after a hearing finds for the employee).
- SB 707, which would prohibit guns in school zones.

It seems that Glazer did not vote against any bills so far but did abstain from voting on the following four bills that passed the Senate anyway:

- SB 3, which would increase the minimum wage. (All sponsors are Democrats.)
- SB 172, which would authorize a 3-year suspension of the high school exit exam while a panel explores other means for assessing 12th grade eligibility for high school graduation.
- SB 548 would authorize childcare workers to form a union. (All sponsors Democrats.)
- SB 788 would end leasing of CA coastal land for offshore oil drilling.

It appears that Glazer has quickly become involved with both the senatorial process and the legislative leadership as evidenced by his being chosen to introduce SB 539, which was written by three other senators. His voting record appears to agree with an article in the Sacramento Bee that suggested Glazer is walking a fine line between progressive and conservative issues in an effort to not alienate either camp. It will be interesting to follow Glazer's voting record in the future.

Sue De Carlo can be reached at decarlo901@comcast.net.
One of DoR’s newest members is Bill Reese (“Like the Peanut Butter Cup,” he says, as a reminder of how to spell his surname), mostly recently from our very own Brentwood in Contra Costa County. Semi-retired, Bill hails originally from Hiawatha, Kansas. He graduated from the University of Kansas School of Law. He moved to California in 1980 but never practiced law here, choosing instead to work in the mortgage business. Why California? “The weather,” he says.

In an unusual twist, Bill belongs to both the Democratic and Republican clubs in Rossmoor. (“So I can hear all the speakers.”) It’s a split that was mirrored in his own family in Kansas where his father was a Republican and his mother was a Democrat. But he says his heart is really with the Democrats. “I identify with them,” he says.

Bill’s main concerns on the cusp of the 2016 presidential election year are economic. “The current concentration of wealth cannot be sustained,” he says, adding that growing the middle class should be the priority in 2016. Tax policy is another major area of interest to him, specifically compelling American corporations to “bring their money back to the U.S.”

Bill’s two adult daughters and grandchildren live in the area. Be sure to give him a warm DoR welcome when you meet him at the club’s many events.

Organizers statewide are making phone calls and signing petitions to generate support for AB 700, the California DISCLOSE Act, which would require that top donors of political ads be clearly identified so that they would no longer be able to hide behind vague, hard-to-figure-out PAC names. The goal is transparency so that voters can easily determine the money behind the messages, and would apply to both print and electronic ads.

The California Legislature reconvenes on August 17, and organizers are amassing as many petition signatures and phone calls to Assembly members as possible during this recess to urge them to vote for AB 700 if it comes to the Assembly floor for a vote. Organizers say that timing of a vote is unknowable, but that it could happen fast when the Assembly reconvenes August 17 if the final wording of the bill can be worked out quickly in committee.

Stay tuned for upcoming opportunities to help push for passage of this important bill. Right now you can sign an online petition in support of AB 700 at www.caclean.org/petition?name=ab700&ref=go:ga-ab700-ab-700 and leave a phone message with our Assembly Member Catharine Baker’s Sacramento office at 916/319-2016. Organizers say that numbers of phone calls (which only take a minute and are tallied in legislative offices) from constituents are especially effective in persuading our legislators.
Upcoming Events

August 3 Book Club: Cadillac Desert
Gateway Multipurpose Room 2, 3 p.m.

August 6 Debate Watch
Tahoe Room at Event Center 5:45–9:00 p.m.

August 10 Film: Gunned Down
Peacock Hall, 1 and 7 p.m.

August 27 General Meeting:
Prof. Fred Lawson on Syria
Event Center, 6 p.m. social, 7 p.m. speaker

September 8 Book Club: Frank: A Life in Politics from the Great Society to Same-Sex Marriage at Gateway MPR 2, 3 p.m.

September 14 Film: Code Black
Peacock Hall, 1 and 7 p.m.

September 24 Feedback Forum
Event Center, 6 p.m.

September 27 Dinner Meeting
Dr. Scott Sagan: Nuclear Disarmament or Nuclear Proliferation? in the Fireside Room

SEPT. 27 DINNER RSVP FORM

DEMOCRATS OF ROSSMOOR DINNER WITH THE STANFORD CLUB
Sunday, September 27, 2015, in the Fireside Room at Gateway
5 p.m. Social Hour — 6 p.m. Dinner — 7 p.m. Program
Speaker Dr. Scott Sagan: Nuclear Disarmament or Nuclear Proliferation

Dinner Menu (Catered by Hamilton Catering)
Appetizers: Chef's choice passed hors d'oeuvres
Salad: Chopped romaine, dried cranberries, walnuts, and goat cheese with vinaigrette dressing
Entrées: Chicken Cordon bleu OR Butternut squash ravioli with sweet potato cream, fresh basil, and asiago and Parmesan cheeses
Served with: Jasmine rice, mixed seasonal vegetable sauté with shallot butter, iced tea and water, freshly baked bread with butter, decaf coffee, and peach cobbler with cream

Member Name(s) ________________________________________________________________
Guest Name(s) ________________________________________________________________
Phone # ________________________________
Email Address__________________________

Entrée choices (circle one)  Chicken Cordon bleu  OR  Butternut squash ravioli

Reserve by September 23. $30 per person. Total amount submitted______________________
Please make your check out to Democrats of Rossmoor.

Put this form and your check in an envelope, and either:
• Mail to Jane Williams, 2200 Golden Rain Rd. #6, Walnut Creek 94595
• Or leave in the Democrats of Rossmoor mailbox at Gateway.