

# Back in the USSR Heroic Adventures in Transnistria

Rory MacLean

*photographs by* Nick Danziger



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Three handwritten signatures in cursive script. The first signature is 'Dan', the second is 'Justin', and the third is 'John'. The signatures are written in black ink on a white background.

Dan, Justin and John  
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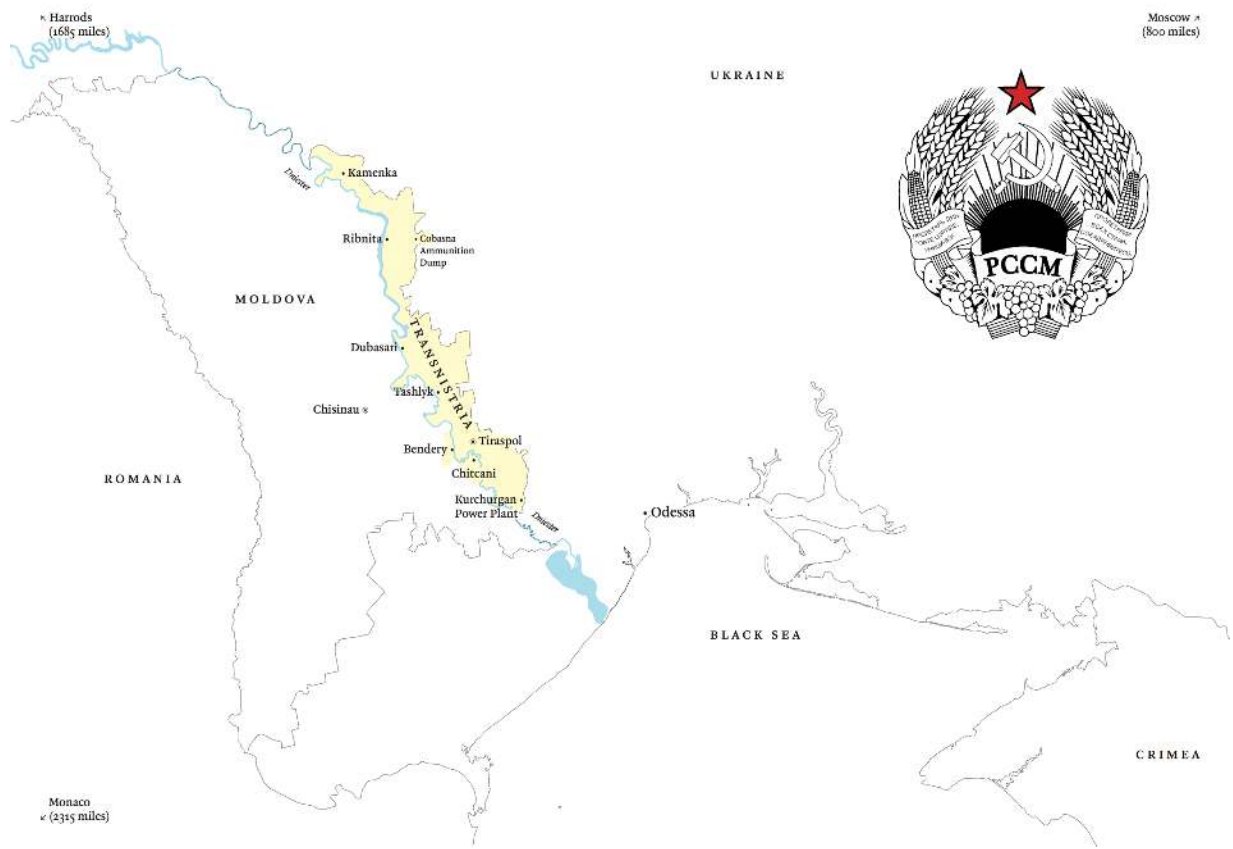
‘Peoples of the world! Proletarians of all nations!  
Unite!’

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Transnistrian timeline

Acknowledgments

Subscribers







‘Long live the Great October Socialist Revolution – the  
start of humanity’s historical journey away from  
capitalism and to socialism!’

# Journey Of A Faithful Traveller

Sunlight sparkles off the broad Dniester River. Grapes glisten in verdant vine terraces above Kamenka. Smugglers' tracks wind across the snow and into silent woods. Patriotic oligarchs in Gucci tracksuits hunt wild boar with ak-47s. A springtime breeze loosens the blossoms from the apricot trees, scattering them over Russian peacekeepers guarding old Soviet munitions dumps. At the Che Guevara High School of Political Leadership the party faithful learn how to launch 'spontaneous actions' while sustaining the half lotus yoga position. Across Tiraspol a young woman celebrates her escape from prostitution, then pays the price for freedom by recruiting other local girls to be trafficked to brothels abroad.

Comrades! Have you ever wondered what became of the socialist dream? What happened to the society of equals? Where all those Red Army generals, KGB colonels and go-getting Moscow tycoons went when they retired? It - and they - live on in Transnistria.

Sort of.



In Transnistria old Soviet symbols and slogans are retained more than 20 years after the collapse of the USSR. At the Dniester Sanatorium in Kamenka, a hand-painted mural celebrates the physical and political health of body, mind and nation.

Transnistria is a breakaway republic of a breakaway republic of the old Soviet Union: youthful yet venerable, ambitious but dreamy, dirt poor and damn profitable. No bigger in size than Devon or Rhode Island, this sliver-thin nowhereland lies both on the eastern bank of the Dniester, one of the oldest geopolitical fault lines in Europe, and at the threshold of an heroic new age. It is proud,

independent-ish and recognised by no other country in the world. It's also the home of my exclusive and elusive host.

Once he was known as New Soviet Man. He was heralded as an archetype, a master of his emotions, a 'higher social biologic being'. He could have been born in Moscow, Kiev or Vladivostok. His name might have been Vladimir, Arkady or Yakov. His singularity was unimportant for he'd risen above the cult of individuality to be a selfless everyman dedicated to spreading the socialist revolution.

But times change and – after the fall of the Berlin Wall – my host and his kind had to learn to think outside the box. He, as a *new* New Soviet Man, needed to keep his eyes on the deal. He began to study profit margins instead of the Great Path of the Party. He looked after Number One. He bought a lavish pied-à-terre in London and donned a Chanel balaclava to fight for Crimean 'independence'. He set up shell companies in Transnistria.

Today most westerners – at least those of the younger generation – have lost the dream of the possibility of creating a better world. Many imagine no change in their lives greater than updating their iPad apps. They construct a solitary existence in a void of political apathy wishing for nothing more than faster wifi. Idealism looks pretty dead west of the Dniester.



On the 17th floor of a residential apartment building in the capital Tiraspol is the headquarters of the First Republican Television Channel. In its control room, a technician volunteers, 'Putin is a hero for us. He makes us proud again.' The sign above the desk reads, 'Do Not Litter'.

But on its eastern shore New Soviet Man embraces bolder dreams (which always include at least one gold Cartier wristwatch). He and his super-elite peers buy industries not apps. Their Facebook friends own airlines and oil fields. Their tweets are followed in the Kremlin. Money enables them to glide all but unseen through life, except when promenading along the Croisette in Cannes. Naive cynics assert it's inconvenient for them that the great Union of



Soviet Socialist Republics was dumped in the trash can of history, but name another dying empire which has given its movers and shakers more golden opportunities?

They – the archetypes who got real – are united by the experience of Communism. Their quixotic and inequitable ideology lives on in the tender hearts of its proletariat (at least of those who haven't yet emigrated; the population of Transnistria has halved over the last 20 years). On the factory floors and across the fallow fields of its collective farms, dreamers and despots alike celebrate Transnistria's uniqueness as the only country in the world not to have recognised the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Dear readers, I invite you to join me and New Soviet Man on a journey into his republic's heart, as well as its numbered Swiss bank accounts. Together we will listen to Slavonic Dixieland music, plunge into the Dniester's frozen New Year waters, wait in awe with the head of national television for a telephone call from the great Vladimir Putin. We will meet the teenagers who dream of being sold to Chelsea or Spartak Moscow and the personable, attractive young women who – in a clever coup of political marketing – are 'sexing up' government ministries both online and in the flesh. We will come to understand what happens to a spunky factory manager after he wins four elections in a row and buys a couple too many S-Class Mercedes. We will see that same old leader crushed as Transnistria embraces the possibility – or at least the impression – of change. Finally we will realise that Communism no longer means Communism as such, but rather a 'special' relationship with Russia.



Vladimir Putin has said his country reserves the right to stand up for ethnic Russians living outside its borders. Most Transnistrians wait for the president to act, even though 500 miles of Ukrainian territory separates their isolated mini-state and Russia.

My friends, this volume is both a personal journey and an earnest exhortation. Believe me, it is time to dispel the myths about New Soviet Man's people's republic. The hour has come to bury the tired clichés that it is a black hole, a penniless smugglers' haven, a criminalised *terra incognita* kept in a state of suspended animation specifically to facilitate illegal activities. Transnistria is not the North Korea of Europe. It is rather a land open for business,

where the balalaikas ring out as the Great Game is played on, and the faithful traveller can find himself – with a little imagination plus a load of cash – back in the USSR.

Sort of.