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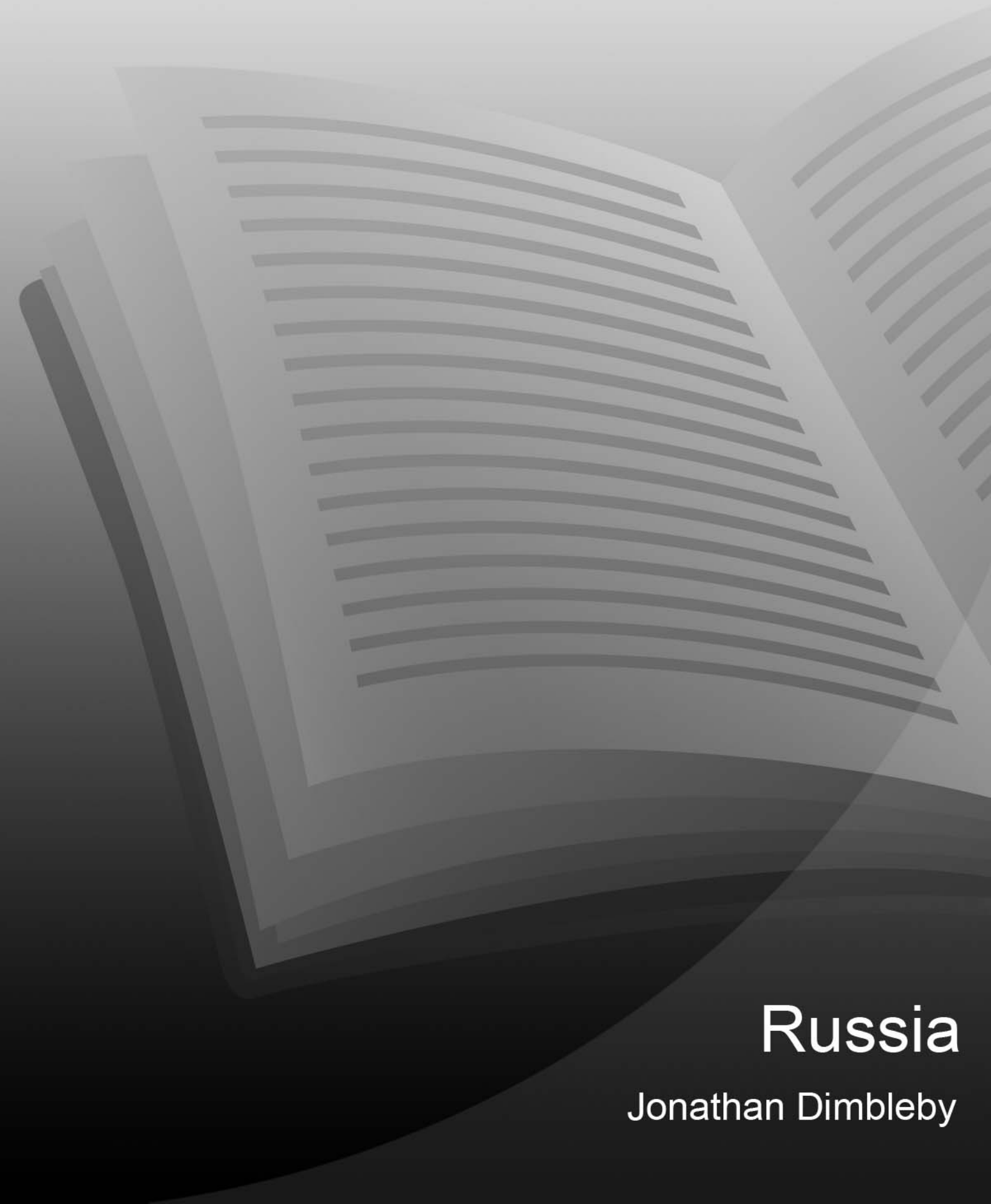

Russia

Jonathan Dimbleby

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About the Author

Jonathan Dimbleby is a broadcaster and author, who has reported from Russia at pivotal moments in the country's recent history. He has written several bestselling books, including a biography of his father *Richard Dimbleby, The Palestinians, The Prince of Wales* and *The Last Governor*. For many years he has presented flagship political programmes for ITV, and he is well known as the presenter of BBC Radio 4's *Any Questions*.

Critical acclaim for *Russia*:

‘Jonathan Dimbleby is the best sort of travel writer – tirelessly curious, sympathetic to his interlocutors, historically aware. There is no better portrait of post-Soviet Russia.’

A. N. Wilson

‘Jonathan Dimbleby’s *Russia* is a fascinating journey through the country today and also through a brutal past to which its people remain prisoner.’

Antony Beevor

‘So much more than a travel documentary, this book really is a voyage of discovery, shot through with penetrating honesty; an almost tortured response to a tortured country.’

Matthew Parris

‘I know of no better psychoanalysis of present-day Russia and the Russians than Jonathan Dimbleby’s acute, insightful but always profoundly sympathetic book. With her domestic and international agendas threatening to impose increasingly on ours, the more we know about and understand what drives Russia, the better. Let Dimbleby be our scout, advisor and guide.’

Andrew Roberts

‘This isn’t just an arduous physical trip into Russia’s awesome and contradictory vastness but also a spiritual and cultural voyage. Dimbleby has created a treasure chest of places, people and ideas that is as enjoyable, entertaining and surprising as it is thoughtful and knowledgeable.’

Simon Sebag Montefiore

‘Jonathan Dimbleby is a superb reporter and an exceptionally shrewd analyst. He explores the new Russia with all his customary verve and insight, with sympathy but without illusions. Anybody who is interested in the nation which Vladimir Putin has created, and which now confronts the West, should read this book.’

MAX HASTINGS

‘A genuine *tour de force* – made all the more remarkable by the way a moving personal story is un-ostentatiously blended into a masterly account of what life is really like in the Russian Federation. I was lost in admiration.’

ANTHONY HOWARD

‘A biography, a history, a love letter, a travel memoir, all rolled up into one – a generous, elegant and absorbing read. Perfect for novices and experts alike.’

KATE MOSSE

‘A spirited and in many cases brave attempt to describe one of the world’s most important civilisations.’

PETER HITCHENS, *Mail on Sunday*

‘The ugly authoritarianism of Vladimir Putin’s Kremlin and Russia’s hydrocarbon fuelled diplomatic bolshiness are now well documented. There are fewer worthwhile accounts of ordinary life across the vast, eccentric Russian continent in the Putin era. Mr Dimbleby’s perceptive travelogue is one of them.’

The Economist

‘Dimbleby’s book is a splendid achievement . . . He constitutes the essence of a good traveller – companionable, thoughtful, sceptical and sometimes wide-eyed with wonder.’

Daily Express

‘All the major issues facing contemporary Russia are raised and dealt with . . . [*Russia*] engages the brilliant analytical journalist in Jonathan Dimbleby.’

Guardian

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RUSSIA

A Journey to the Heart of a Land and its People

Jonathan Dimbleby

BBC BOOKS

Epub ISBN: 9781409073468
Version 1.0
www.randomhouse.co.uk

First published in 2008 to accompany the television series entitled *Russia: A Journey with Jonathan Dimbleby*, produced by Mentorn Media and first broadcast on BBC2 in 2008. This paperback edition first published 2009.
Series producers: George Carey and Teresa Cherfas

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Published by BBC Books, an imprint of Ebury Publishing.
A Random House Group Company

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009
Addresses for companies within the Random House Group can be found at www.randomhouse.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 846 07673 2

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Commissioning editor: Martin Redfern
Project editor: Christopher Tinker
Copy-editor: Esther Jagger
Designer: Jonathan Baker at Seagull Design
Maps: Peter Wilkinson
Picture researcher: Sarah Hopper
Production: David Brimble

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Cox & Wyman, Reading

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For Jessica

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to many individuals without whom it would have been impossible to write this book. George Carey was the originator of the BBC television series *Russia – A Journey with Jonathan Dimbleby*, which the book accompanies. Without his passionate commitment as executive producer, the television programmes (and therefore the book) would not have seen the light of day. Between them, he and Teresa Cherfas (as joint series producers) plotted and reconnoitred my route through Russia and did much of the preliminary research for all five films. In addition, Teresa Cherfas acted as my translator for almost the whole journey; her skill and sensitivity in this role were invaluable. Even when I took a different view from either of theirs, our discussions were invariably stimulating. I am much in their debt.

My three directors – Hugh Thompson (films 1 and 2), Jamie Muir (films 3 and 5), and David Wallace (film 4) – read and commented on those parts of the book covered by their films; their own research was also helpful. In addition, Jamie Muir not only undertook detailed research on my behalf, but read the entire manuscript; his scholarly comments clarified a wide range of issues and saved me from several egregious errors.

I owe a similar debt of gratitude to Dr Lyuba Vinogradova, who scoured the manuscript, bringing consistency to my spelling of Russian words and names, correcting dates and facts, and, on matters of judgement and interpretation, offering a consistently helpful and constructive critique of my attitudes and assumptions.

Maria Kolesnikova and Anastasia Serdyukova not only provided me with vital research, but – well beyond the call

of duty – became my eyes and ears on the ground (especially when I was away from the camera), acting both as guides and interpreters. They were stimulating and refreshing companions who taught me more about Russia than I think they will ever realize. Many other individuals helped me along the way. I cannot name them all here, but Olga Fleshler, Katya Golitsine, Yulia Korneva, Anzor Kushkhabiev, Magomedkhan Magomedkhanov, Tatiana Tikhomirova and Andrei Toporkov were especially generous with their time and their insights. Similarly, our Russian production manager, Marina Erastova, not only navigated our team through Russia's administrative and organizational shoals, but made my own experience far more enjoyable than it might otherwise have been. But I am grateful above all to the scores of Russians who welcomed me into their lives with warmth and generosity. Without their readiness to talk to me about themselves and their Motherland, the book would have been stillborn.

The films have been blessed by the technical brilliance of my colleagues on camera and sound, but all of them also played a part in shaping my experience and my responses to it. My gratitude to cameramen Simon Ffrench (film 1), David Niblock (films 2 and 3), and Peter Harvey (films 4 and 5); and likewise to sound recordists James Pursey (films 1 and 2), Ivo Hanak (film 3), Neil Laycock (film 4), and Mick Duffield (film 5). In London my production managers Fiona Frankland, Fiona Herson, Sarah Mires and Carmelina Palumbo eased my professional aches and pains and were remarkably tolerant of my foibles.

I have been exceptionally fortunate in my editor at BBC Books, Martin Redfern, whose comments and suggestions have been unfailingly constructive and thoughtful. I am grateful to him and his colleagues (especially project editor Christopher Tinker and my meticulous copy editor Esther Jagger) for meeting a very tight schedule with such superb professionalism. My agent at David Higham Associates,

Veronique Baxter, and her colleague Annabel Hardman have been a constant source of support and sound advice throughout the long process from commission to publication; and my PA, Stella Keeley, kept my life in order throughout.

I would not have been able to undertake this project, nor would I have completed it, without the sustained nurture of my wife Jessica. She has endured my frequent ups and downs with stoic patience. Her wise counsel was given unstintingly despite the fact that, a few months after Russia started to dominate my working life, she became pregnant with her first child, our daughter Daisy – who celebrated the end of my journey by reaching the grand old age of six months. For this and other blessings, *Russia – A Journey to the Heart of a Land and its People* is dedicated to Jessica.

All those named above have between them contributed greatly to this book. None of them is responsible for any of its errors, which – as ever – are mine alone.

FOREWORD
TO THE 2009 EDITION

As its title suggests, *Russia – a Journey to the Heart of a Land and its People* is principally about the wide variety of places I visited and individuals I met on a 10,000-mile journey from Murmansk to Vladivostok. In describing my experiences along the way, I also explore the society, culture and history that have shaped the beliefs and attitudes that form the national mosaic of what has been known, since the fall of communism, as the Russian Federation. But the evolving nature of the Russian political system – a system that has come under even closer international scrutiny since the first edition of this book – also formed a crucial part of my exploration.

At that time, when many Western observers were still inclined to take a relatively benign view of what I described as 'Putinism', I concluded that the structure of the Russian state could properly be defined as 'crypto-fascist'. But, perhaps paradoxically, I also concluded that the policy adopted by the West (specifically at the behest of Washington through the NATO alliance) was misconceived and would prove counter-productive. In the intervening months, two unrelated but tumultuous events have put Russia even more sharply under the international spotlight. I did not foresee that the Kremlin would order the invasion of Georgia, or that the global financial system would implode. Yet both these shockwaves have served only to reinforce my views about the Russian people, the system under which they consent to live, and the way in which the West should deal with the Kremlin.

Although I was struck by the diverse qualities of the hundreds of people from all walks of life that I met on my journey, I was soon made to appreciate that the 140 million citizens of the Russian Federation are remarkably uniform in two crucial respects: their hostility towards Western democracy and their passionate nationalism – their unequivocal love of what they call without embarrassment the ‘Motherland’. In recent months both characteristics have been more than usually on display, and have been brilliantly exploited by the Russian prime minister and his successor as president, Dmitry Medvedev.

As I explore at some length in this book, the disturbing intensity of these mutually reinforcing attitudes has its origins in the long history of brutality and torment that culminated in the social upheaval that followed the collapse of the Soviet system. For most Russians, those years – the decade that preceded the election of President Putin – were synonymous with fear and insecurity. But the then president, Boris Yeltsin, presided not only over the death throes of communism: he ushered in the age of the oligarchs – the establishment of a kleptocracy that placed the resources of the nation in the hands of just a few embryonic billionaires. As they endured this baleful transformation, the Russian people were urged to believe that, before long, their lives too would be enriched. Not only had communism been replaced by capitalism but – they were instructed – dictatorship by democracy: the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness was now enshrined in a constitutional framework that would liberate them from the shackles of the past. When this mirage vanished into the quicksands of crime, violence, corruption and unemployment, democracy was swiftly judged by the overwhelming majority of the Russian people to be the cause of their woes, not the cure.

Putin came to power in 2000, promising a resurgence that would combine the restoration of domestic security and the

reassertion of the Motherland's legitimate claim to be a major player on the international stage. To these ends the former KGB officer set about muzzling the media, co-opting the judiciary, and bludgeoning the nascent parliament into becoming a rubber stamp for the Kremlin. And so far from offering any protest – with a few brave exceptions, scores of whom have been beaten up, murdered or imprisoned for their pains – the Russian people urged him on. 'Here at last,' they seemed to say to themselves, 'we have the strong man that we need: a new tsar for a new age.' He described this freshly minted fascist system as 'sovereign democracy'.

That system is now being put to the test on both the domestic and the international fronts. Russia is starting to feel the arctic chill of the global recession. Oil prices, which were nudging $150 a barrel six months ago, have plummeted by two-thirds to under $40. Even though those prices will eventually rise again – almost certainly to levels we have not yet witnessed ($200 a barrel within the next decade still seems more than likely) – the short-term impact of this crash has been severe. The stock market has tumbled and the rouble seems certain to slide further against the dollar. As Russia is heavily dependent on imports, this informal devaluation will not only push up consumer prices (inflation is already above 12 per cent), but sharpen the widespread fear that unemployment will rise to levels that caused such misery towards the end of the last century.

Russia's predicament is the worse because the Kremlin failed to invest the nation's vast treasure chest, which had been filled to overflowing with bonanza revenues from oil, gas and other raw materials, during the boom years. Instead of using the nation's new wealth to revive the decrepit social and economic infrastructure of the state, the Kremlin recycled it back to the oligarchs, the multi-billionaires who had been permitted to seize control of these invaluable assets after the fall of communism. Russia has remained

essentially a producer of raw materials and a rentier economy.

The nation's economic downturn is likely to be aggravated by the fact that the glue holding this post-modern autocracy together is corruption. Despite its membership of the G8 group of industrialized nations, Russia is only marginally less corrupt than some of the worst offenders in the developing world, such as Nigeria or Pakistan. No individual or company, however prestigious, can do business in the Russian Federation without greasing the palms of officialdom to unlock the door to profitable investment. You want permission or a permit? You pay under the counter. You want your application to go to the top of the pile? You pay again. You want your consortium to beat his? You pay more than him. At an estimated cost of $30 billion a year, nothing could be better calculated to deter foreign investment during a global downturn.

Some foreign observers speculate that Russia's economic woes will undermine Putin's credibility, and even his hold on power. But there is precious little evidence for this. Indeed, I suspect that Putinism could become even more popular as the Kremlin blames the West, particularly the United States, for incubating the financial crisis of which the Russian people are the blameless victims. Certainly, the prime minister appears to have suffered no loss of popularity. And, in the unlikely event of social unrest, he has the well-oiled security apparatus of a repressive state at his disposal to ensure that his 'sovereign democracy' prevails.

Putinism at home and Putinism abroad are mutually reinforcing. The invasion of Georgia in August 2008 was not simply an assertion of military might by the Kremlin in Russia's 'near-abroad', but the culmination of a chain of events that, from a Russian perspective, constituted a national humiliation at the hands of the United States. From the early 1990s onwards, the West persistently rebuffed the Kremlin's efforts to forge a partnership – a post-Cold War

strategic alliance – with NATO. Instead, under pressure from the White House, NATO expanded eastwards, embracing former Soviet satellite states, such as Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic. Even more provocatively, its leaders promised membership to Georgia and Ukraine, both of which border Russia's volatile southern flank in the Caucasus. The Kremlin protested, but in vain. To the Russian people it was as though their old adversary were dancing on the grave of their lost past.

This resentment was fuelled when the White House (in 2002) unilaterally abrogated the thirty-year-old ABM Treaty to free the path to negotiations with Poland for the deployment of anti-ballistic missiles only a few hundred kilometres from the Russian border. Although Washington insisted that the purpose was to shield the world from a future nuclear threat from Iran, the Russians interpreted the move as a direct threat to their own national security. When the agreement was duly signed in August 2008, the Kremlin responded by warning that it would target Poland with nuclear missiles, which would be moved into Russia's most westerly enclave, Kaliningrad, for this purpose.

Although this threat has little more than symbolic significance (Russia has more than enough nuclear weapons in its present silos to obliterate Poland many times over), it reflects a deepening hostility towards the perceived arrogance of the United States and its allies. As I found again and again on my journey, it is virtually impossible to find any Russian (even among the minority that still endorses Western principles of democracy) who dissents from the Kremlin proposition that the sole purpose of this ABM deployment is to confront and further humiliate the Motherland.

There were those who allowed themselves to believe that Putin's successor, Dmitry Medvedev, would be more amenable. They were swiftly disabused. As I argue in this book, there will be no significant change in policy either at

home or abroad because Putin remains in charge. If confirmation of this were needed, Georgia provided the evidence in spectacular fashion.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that this drama did not come out the blue. Moreover, it can be argued persuasively that if only NATO had been less dismissive of Russia's overtures in the 1990s, the peoples who inhabit this little cauldron in the Caucasus might have been spared the mayhem that was unleashed upon them as a result of President Saakashvilli's reckless adventure in South Ossetia. There would have been no need – let alone excuse – for Russia's heavy-handed military response. Instead the Kremlin's paranoid anxiety about Western expansionism and encirclement would have been mediated through a NATO structure that would have made very clear to Saakashvilli that his Western friends would not tolerate his vainglorious démarche. The powerful separatist tendencies in both Abkasia and South Ossetia would have been contained, if not resolved, through joint diplomacy rather than confrontation – and a great many lives would have been spared on both sides.

We would also have been spared the posturing of Georgia's Western allies. As Washington and London denounced Russia's 'unacceptable' actions, the Republican presidential candidate John McCain reflected their hubris by uttering the risible statement, 'We are all Georgians now'. Yet it was obvious from the very start that NATO did not for a moment contemplate a military response, or even a significant diplomatic slap across the Kremlin's wrist. No episode could have demonstrated the vacuum at the heart of the West's strategy towards the 'new' Russia with greater clarity.

But if at one level the principal actors in this Caucasian drama seemed like refugees from the Theatre of the Absurd, it was not at all funny. Notwithstanding the Russian withdrawal from Georgia (brokered by President Sarkozy of

France), both South Ossetia and Abkasia are now de facto Russian protectorates. In addition, there is great uncertainty about what all this might mean for Ukraine, and especially for Sebastopol, the Black Sea port that, under an agreement valid until 2017, is leased to the Russians as a naval base for their Black Sea fleet. With a population in the city of Sebastopol region that is predominantly Russian, the potential for future confrontation with NATO is self-evident. Another misjudgement on either side would be very much more dangerous.

Mercifully, wiser counsels in Europe, led by France and Germany, have so far prevailed over the militarists in Washington. Now, rather than honouring its invitation to both Georgia and Ukraine, NATO seems set to postpone it for the indefinite future. Russia has put down a marker and the West has been unwilling, if not unable, to erase it. In the process, at least to their own satisfaction, the honour of the Russian people has been redeemed: the Kremlin acted righteously in Georgia and gave the West a bloody nose for good measure.

None of this should lead to the conclusion that we are in the early stages of a new Cold War. To believe that is to be trapped in a time warp. There is no ideological struggle between East and West, no superpower confrontation, no military stand-off between Moscow and Washington, and the nuclear umbrella under which we all sheltered and shivered has been folded away. The threat of ‘Mutually Assured Destruction’ – which enjoyed the apposite acronym MAD – no longer holds the world in thrall. The struggle for global supremacy that defined the Cold War is over, and to suggest otherwise is either mischievous or muddled.

However, the present stand-off between the White House and the Kremlin, between Russia and the West, damages both sides. It will take a degree of statesmanship that has so far been markedly absent to restore relations to a mutually beneficial level. The Kremlin is determined to re-establish its

proper place in the dysfunctional family of powerful nations that now jostle for power and influence in the ‘New World Disorder’ bequeathed by the end of the Cold War. This may not be an edifying thought but, as the new American president will surely discover, it needs to be understood. Russia’s aspirations will have to be accommodated if the world is to have any realistic hope of meeting the far greater challenges that face our multi-polar twenty-first century. In the meantime, fasten your seat-belt – it promises to be a bumpy ride.

Jonathan Dimbleby
January 2009

INTRODUCTION

It was an irresistible invitation: to make an epic journey across Russia from Murmansk in the far northwest of the country to Vladivostok in the far southeast. The route would be some 10,000 miles in length and would allow me to explore the past, the present and the future of the largest country in the world. Travelling principally by road, rail and boat, I would experience a land and its people from ground level. I would visit great cities and tiny villages, I would explore forests and mountains, huge lakes and long rivers, and – most importantly of all – I would have a chance to meet hundreds of Russians in all their rich diversity. The journey would take a total of eighteen weeks, enough time to delve beneath the surface and discover some of the realities of life in a resurgent nation that for me – in Churchill's aphorism – was still 'a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma'. Perhaps, I told myself, I would be able to reveal the enigma, unwrap the mystery and solve the riddle. It was a journalist's dream.

I would not quite be an innocent abroad. As a television reporter I had been to Russia before, but that was during the Cold War when it was impossible to have a free and open conversation with anyone. Attempting to interpret a pyramid of Soviet half-truths and evasions for the benefit of a Western audience for whom Russia meant the Gulag, nuclear weapons and vodka was, to put it mildly, a challenging frustration. My fleeting impressions of the Soviet Union in the late seventies and early eighties was of a society stricken by repression, viciousness and corruption; of a political and social environment corroded by bad faith and self-delusion. Although I was able to glimpse and record

a little of the material and spiritual poverty of everyday life in Moscow, I felt myself to be deeply ignorant of the humanity that trudged to and fro in front of the camera's eye. So, like most observers, I gave a half cheer when President Mikhail Gorbachev ushered in the era of *perestroika* and *glasnost*; when I met him before the fall – an encounter that I describe in these pages – I very nearly gave a full cheer. But, aside from a long weekend in Moscow in the celebratory days following the final collapse of the Soviet Empire in 1991, I had not been back since. I was intrigued at the thought of discovering how Russia had altered and where the nation was heading.

In the decade following the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia came to be regarded internationally as something of political joke, a fallen giant that no longer threatened the victorious superpower and could therefore be safely consigned to the margins of history. But from the start of this century and the arrival of Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin that patronizing and blinkered assumption had been rudely exposed. The international community came belatedly to realize that the ownership of huge energy reserves in the form of oil and gas, in a world where demand is dramatically growing as resources sharply diminish, had given Putin's Russia a muscle-flexing source of international power and influence. Russia, we had all come to appreciate, would matter very much indeed and could be ignored only at our peril.

Against that background, I had a host of questions in my mind. What is the relationship of Russians to one another and to those who rule over them? How do Russians see themselves in the world today? What role do they want their nation to play? What are the sources and origins of these aspirations and attitudes? And after so many centuries of suffering what is it to love 'Mother Russia'? I knew that those and many other questions would take me not only on a long physical journey but on a political, cultural and

psychological one as well. Intrigued by what it means for people to say, ‘I am Russian’, I wanted to understand better their sense of the past, their individual histories and beliefs and ambitions, and to illuminate, if possible, the elusive nature of the ‘Russian soul’. The opportunities seemed limitless and exhilarating.

The invitation had come from one of television’s grandees, George Carey, who had managed to sell the idea of a five-part documentary series called *Russia – A Journey with Jonathan Dimbleby* to the controller of BBC2. He then sold it to me. But as soon as he had done so, I got cold feet, feeling suddenly overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the task to which I had committed myself. Half in panic, I told myself I was taking a terrible risk with my life that was not so much physical as professional. To make the Russian programmes I would have to give up the security of a stimulating perch at the edge of the political arena as the presenter of ITV’s weekly flagship political programme, *Jonathan Dimbleby*. And for what, I asked myself: the insecurity of an unknown venture in an alien land without a compass? Although I would be travelling with a producer, a director, a researcher and camera crew, and despite the fact that I would have a translator and interpreters at my side (I had no more than half a dozen words of Russian at my command and I could not read the Cyrillic alphabet), I felt that I would be very alone, if not entirely lost.

To ward off the demons of insecurity that now started to assail me, I told myself that I would become a twenty-first-century version of the Victorian traveller. Baedeker in one hand, journal in my knapsack, I would be open to every experience, shying away from nothing, however eccentric or bizarre it might seem. Russia has always invited contradictory epithets – romantic and brutal, harsh and generous, brooding and exuberant, raw and sophisticated, crude and subtle. In writing a book about my journey to accompany the TV series, I would have the space to attempt

a resolution of these contradictions, or at least to make sense of them. I would be able to immerse myself in a country that straddles half the globe, and would investigate the complexities of a nation that embraces – or rather strives to contain – so much ethnic, cultural and religious diversity.

My route was to take me deep into rural Russia, travelling south from Murmansk through Karelia via St Petersburg and Moscow (hoping to peer beneath the carapace of these great cities to hear the beating heart of the new Russian metropolis) to the edge of the Black Sea. From there I would traverse the war-torn Caucasus until I reached the Caspian Sea and the mouth of the Volga. Following the course of that vital artery for hundreds of miles, I would pass through the cities of Volgograd, Samara and Kazan before heading eastward once again, to cross the Urals into the vastness of Siberia, with its massive deposits of oil, gas and precious metals, until eventually I reached the Pacific coast and my final destination, Vladivostok. *Russia – A Journey to the Heart of a Land and Its People* would be the story of that journey, a personal odyssey in which I would have the chance to describe anything and everything along the way.

In an attempt to bring perspective and shape to the journey, I decided that I would sketch in the principal historical events that have shaped the Russian drama – from the arrival of the Vikings and the later invasion of the Mongols through to Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great, and in the twentieth century from the Bolshevik Revolution and murder of the last tsar through to Lenin, Stalin, Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Putin. (There is a timeline on page 543 for quick reference.) I would also draw on the glorious wealth of Russian literature, especially that of the nineteenth century, to distil some of the insights of Gogol, Dostoevsky, Lermontov, Tolstoy and others, both to illuminate their own tumultuous times and, through them, to explore the character of the Russian psyche. In short, I told

myself as I imagined this huge canvas in front of me, I was entitled to be daunted but I should not let myself be intimidated: I was about to have a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

And that is just about how it has turned out, though not quite in the way I had expected. For example, I did not foresee in 2006 when I set out on the first leg of my journey that relations between Russia and the West would deteriorate so sharply and rapidly. When I started out, the international 'jury' had not even begun to form a coherent view of Putin's Russia. But since then, Putin's increasingly autocratic rule at home, combined with his international assertiveness, has started to disconcert more and more observers. I witnessed Putinism at close quarters, discovering and confronting the profoundly disquieting attitudes of most, though by no means all, Russians to the values and principles that a Western liberal holds dear. I have tried to understand and explain their deepening aversion to Western democracy, but I have not refrained from expressing my views about it. I have also come to believe that a quasi-ideological gulf between 'them' and 'us' makes it likely that Russian resurgence will find itself on a collision course with the West. This does not mean that a new Cold War is in the offing (an outcome that would be inimical to Russia's immediate and long-term interests as an energy superpower), but a reversion to a form of peaceful coexistence is more likely than the positive collaboration that optimists like me had expected a decade ago. To a child of the Cold War, who rejoiced unequivocally at the fall of the Berlin Wall, this is a dispiriting prospect.

I was shocked too by the accelerating corruption of the political process within Russia: notably the absence of free and fair elections, the supine torpor of the parliamentary body, the Duma, the muzzling of the media, the intimidation of the judiciary and a profound contempt for human rights. I did not set out to be an uncritical traveller, but the extent to

which this retreat from the guiding principles of a free and open society has eaten into the soul of the nation shocked and dismayed me. Even though I had a huge number of gloriously challenging, stimulating, amusing and exhilarating encounters with Russians of all kinds – encounters that form the bedrock of this book – and found among them some of the most generous and warm-hearted people you could hope to find anywhere, I could not quite shake off the disquieting sense that I was travelling through a crypto-fascist state by any other name.

But all that formed part of my ‘exterior’ journey. In parallel, I gradually came to realize that I had also embarked on an ‘interior’ journey and that it would have been wrong to conceal this. Throughout the two years I have spent on this project my perspective on Russia has been affected, if not shaped, by an emotional volatility that troubled me especially when I was away from home. While I never set out to write an objective account of my journey across Russia, I found that, day after day, I was turning to my notebook to record my sharply fluctuating moods. After rereading those notes and recognizing the extent to which these emotions (which would swing rapidly from delight to despair) had coloured my outlook, I decided that – except in bad faith – I could not pretend that it had been otherwise. Some of these feelings therefore surface from time to time in my narrative. But I can only make sense of these passages for the reader by outlining the background to what has been a roller-coaster period in my personal life.

A little over three years before I embarked on my Russian venture, I met an opera singer called Susan Chilcott who was the leading lyric soprano of her generation. In May 2003 we started to have an affair. Some months earlier, after treatment for breast cancer, she had been given the all-clear. But very soon after our relationship began she discovered a secondary lump in her breast, and two days later her oncologist told her that the cancer had spread to

her liver. No further treatment was possible; she had only a short time to live. Although Sue protested that I should not turn my life upside down for her, I felt that I had no choice but to be by her side for the final months of her life. In so doing, I had chosen to leave my wife Bel with whom I had shared thirty-five years of marriage and to whom I had always believed myself bound as a partner for life. I still do not adequately understand the intensity of passion and pity that animated my decision; only that I felt I had to follow my heart and what seemed to be my duty. For the next three months I lived with Sue and her four-year-old son Hugh. They were precious days of intense joy mingled with deep sorrow until, on 4 September 2003, Sue died in my arms.

It was a tragedy for those who loved music and had heard Sue sing or seen her on stage. I found myself broken by a grief that was more dreadful than I had ever imagined such pain could be. For day after day I could barely bring myself to get out of bed in the morning. Nor did I care whether I lived or died. I could not rest, I could not sleep, I could not think. With the benefit of hindsight, I feel now that only my wonderful family and a small handful of close friends saved me from going out of my mind. When I went back to work, colleagues at the BBC and ITV were astonishingly sensitive and forbearing.

I began to hope that I could return to our family home. But although my adult children, encouraged by Bel, were more loving and understanding than I could ever have hoped, I was in no condition to repair the damage I had inflicted on our marriage. Bel understandably decided that she could take no more, and, a few months after Sue’s death, moved out of our farmhouse. Now I felt doubly bereft and bewildered. The very foundations of my life seemed to have collapsed. I did not know who I was or where I was going, and I could see no way out of the long, dark tunnel in which I now found myself.