enough to ensure she never wrote back.

To the military museum, in this city dominated by the huge shadow of its wartime past, in its previous incarnation as Stalingrad, the pivotal location in the fight against the Nazis, in a war which led to the death of twenty-two million Russians. My colleague mentions in passing that your average soldier, when entering the battle of Stalingrad, could expect to live for precisely one more day.

But there is little time to linger over this image we have a school to visit. Arriving at Grammar School no. 1 we are led into the small well-lit classroom where no more than about fifteen eight-year old students sit neatly in pairs. I'm surprised at the small class size, but of course Russia, like so many European countries, is suffering from a critically negative birth rate. There are incentives of ten thousand dollars per couple just to have a second child.

The boys and girls stand up to greet us and sing a sweet welcome song. The walls are covered in posters, charts and flashcards, the textbooks are ablaze with colour, and the lesson itself is highly engaging. There is no mistaking either the concern and passion the teacher has for her charges and for her subject, or the confidence, motivation and the ability of these girls and boys.



Preserving the memory of the past

Saturday December 10th: Astrakhan

We stop at an onion-domed Orthodox church. Now it rises self-confidently upwards, but fifty years after its construction this building was demoted by the Stalinist regime into a storehouse and then became a bus station. My colleague points out the side-chapel where the cashiers once sat dispensing tickets. These days however the atmosphere is resurgent: the paint is fresh, the many icons have been restored and tall candles burn in every nook and cranny.

Passing through the city I am struck by the names of the roads: Soviet Street, Communist Street, Red Army Avenue, as well as by the red stars, the sculptures of muscular socialist youth and the ubiquitous statues of Lenin. Unlike everywhere else in Eastern Europe, where the paraphernalia of post-war socialism was dismantled within days of the revolutions of 1989, here these emblems are still treasured. Other countries may have reverted to their old symbols of nationhood, but here these are the markers in the national story.

Sunday December 11th: Astrakhan-Moscow

On our way out to the airport, we pass the suburb upriver where the 'New Russians' live. Villas (considered to be "European style"), 4x4s parked in the garages, children's swings in the large gardens: these are the symbols of conspicuous consumption for which these nouveaux riches are known. It's fairly clear from the tone of my companions that to be a New Russian is not entirely a positive achievement...

Monday February 12th -13th: Minsk, Belarus

Outside, the temperature seems to have plummeted. A red sign blinks the message "-17°c". Emerging from the warmth of the metro into the open air is to have ten thousand tiny men work at your face with miniature icepicks, while goblins chew your earlobes. I should have bought a hat long ago, but it hardly seems worth it now, so near the end of the trip, and I can't think of many uses for big furry headgear in Dhaka.

February 14th: Moscow

Even though I have been shown kindness after kindness, and been witness to the magic of a vast country perfectly iced in snow, I know it's now high time to push open the front door of my own house, and sink gratefully into a bed that knows me. And after ten days bursting at the seams with words, not to talk to a single person until I do so. Far easier to travel in silence than to have to start another relationship: no more need for company till then.

And of all the communities that could exist, there's only one that calls out to me now. ■