

Carolyn Lane : update on recent adventures

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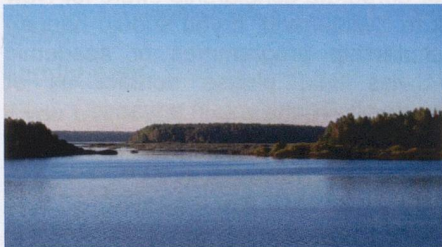
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Carolyn Lane: Update on recent adventures

Greetings. I promised an "occasional piece" – and what better time than now. First – a question: what do Switzerland, New Zealand, and Russia have in common? Well – the first answer is Us! Mani and I had a couple of weeks in Russia, before we came back to New Zealand for this summer. Since then all sorts of ideas have been nudging each other in my mind... things about similarity and difference, about how, perhaps, geography shapes culture and politics.

So, first, the itinerary. We flew from Zurich to Moscow, had a few days there touring, then took a river cruise down the Baltic waterway (the River Volga is the part which we can all hum along to) to St Petersburg, for a few more days there before flying back to Zurich. It was great! Constantly interesting, thought-provoking – and sometimes jaw-dropping.

The trip was a complete package, so we had the same companions on the metropolitan parts as on the river-cruise; about half-half American and French, with a smattering of "others" like us. That also meant we got to know our guides to the point where they were sometimes surprisingly frank.



Baltic waterway - miles of water and forest

It's taken me ever since to process the photos and stories – you can see where I'm up to on www.carolyn.lane.wordpress.com – that's still a work in progress. But processing the meaning of what we saw... that's a different story.

One huge impression is about space. We're used to unpopulated space in New Zealand. In the Helvetia survey this was one of the Swiss-Aotearoa differences that mattered to people.

But Russia is a whole other scale of magnitude. There are ten time-zones from one side of Russia to the other!

We went between two major cities, along what has been a major transport corridor for hundreds of years and so is quite populated. Even then, there were hours of cruising between settlements. And the pull of the cities is de-populating those towns and villages as market forces take over from five year plans.

Moscow has 12 million residents – and doubles that in the working day. Nearly twice as many residents as Switzerland, and three times the whole of New Zealand. Huge concentrations of population – and then the vast emptinesses.

How can you govern such a place? we asked ourselves. Does the geography drive a culture that creates a Russian addiction to "strong-man leadership"? It seems they swapped the Tsars for other figures who centralised power (and wealth) just as greedily, and dispensed it just as unevenly.

Most of the people we talked to shrugged in acknowledgement of the corruption – "no, we don't like it, but it's just the way it is" – and the other ways money and power play out. Is that felt to be the price you have to pay to have a "strong" man running the nation? Even when you know how power corrupts?

Ah, the blessings of the Bundesrat presidency practices! No chance for megalomania to develop there. In Switzerland, geography and culture seemed to drive an early aversion to the centralisation of power.

Similarly in New Zealand. Our first settlers largely came from the UK, where once they'd put royalty in its place, democracy balanced out power. Add to that the self-selection of people with independent spirits to come pioneering, and the need to negotiate with equally independent Māori No wonder we turf out politicians with symptoms of power-hunger.

Something else which must be national-character-forming is the experience of invasion. For New Zealand – never. For Switzerland, not since Napoleon. For Russia....such a history of people sweeping through, and with such destruction. I can understand destruction during battle.

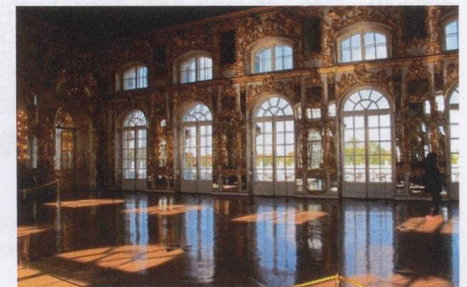
But to deliberately destroy another country's cultural heritage... that is something else.

During the Second World War the Germans occupied the great palaces outside St Petersburg. The Russians had removed what treasures they could. The Germans took others as booty. But when they were withdrawing, they set fires and explosives to destroy the whole.

What happened next is the significant part. Once symbols of Imperial power and wealth, those palaces had been "reclaimed" post-Revolution as treasures of the people. Now the decision was to pour resources into the reconstruction of those buildings.

People were starving. The economy was war-shocked. But re-building and re-gilding was a priority for the national identity. Interesting to wonder about the decision-making around the Christchurch rebuild!

Now, parts of each palace have exhibition spaces devoted to the destruction and rebuilding. A small group of German tourists were hushed. I would have liked to ask them about their reaction, but didn't.



Catherine's palace - restored

One of our guides told us, though, that despite having studied German at University she would never take a German tour party.

Another told us that when she was at school, Stalin was still a hero. She still found it hard to contemplate the similarities between Hitler and Stalin. But many fear what they start to see in Putin.

Perhaps as technology shrinks the impact of geography, a different form of democracy will emerge in Russia too. Maybe not like Switzerland, or New Zealand, but something that fits such distances and differences.

By Carolyn Lane