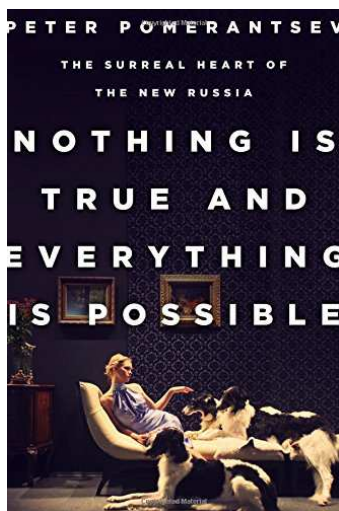


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Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible



Release Date: November 11, 2014

Publisher/Imprint: PublicAffairs

Pages: 256

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Reviewed by: Nathaniel L. Moir

“readers will find *Nothing is True and Everything Is Possible* not only unsettling but also difficult to put down.”

As the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe transitioned from communism, it was not surprising to hear that the most fervent democratic entrepreneurs were formerly among the most ardent of communists. Later, it seemed that the biggest problems in Russia consisted of gangsters and organized crime, trouble in Chechnya, and Boris Yeltsin’s fledgling attempts to get Russia on its feet.

Now, the ongoing transformation of Russia includes the annexation of not only Crimea but also attempts to break Ukraine apart and the testing of NATO through militaristic violations of international airspace.

Indeed, the irony and dynamism of Russia’s political and ideological evolution has been profound, ironic, and consistently troubling. Recent and ongoing events, as noted, prominently indicate many such downsides. Peter Pomerantsev’s *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* explores these issues and Russia’s transformation through the perspectives of numerous individuals and organizations in a manner that is fascinating, disconcerting and very well written.

Pomerantsev, a London-based, Russian-born writer for the *London Review of Books*, the *Daily Beast*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Newsweek* is more than qualified to provide a kaleidoscope of views. Through the course of extended vignettes and anecdotes, he describes how money—vis-à-vis entrepreneurs and natural resource exploitation—has created, and is creating, a physical and spiritual landscape which is broken. Perhaps worse, this landscape is dominated by an authoritarianism that is perhaps more disturbing than anything Orwell described or that seemed so fearful during the cold war. This ‘authoritarianism,’ in its many forms, is the centerpiece of the book.

Pomerantsev describes a highly sophisticated and manipulative state that embodies the use of paradox to proactively portray itself as a victim. Yet, it also promotes itself,

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or at least recently it did, as an incredibly modern and progressive country. The \$50 billion Sochi Olympics—almost double compared to the previous summer Olympics in London—perhaps most clearly demonstrates the paradox and problems in which Russia seems to both stagger and swagger. This is a pertinent example because, allegedly, \$30 billion of the \$50 billion was “diverted.”

The role of television is especially prominent and serves as a thread in the book. This is due to Pomerantsev’s employment at the time with the network, TNT, as a producer of reality shows. This position exposed him to a wide variety of potential media projects and a large swath of Russian culture. In turn, it provides Pomerantsev with a surreal series of contexts and stories.

In some ways, he becomes a post-modern, media-focused Virgil, especially in his descriptions of life in Moscow and of the city itself. In the case of the media and in his description of television specifically, he notes how critical control of television was in the establishment of political hegemony within the Russian Federation.

“The first thing the President had done when he came to power in 2000 was to seize control of television...And the new Kremlin won’t make the same mistake the old Soviet Union did: it will never let TV become dull. The task is to synthesize Soviet control with Western entertainment.”

Pomerantsev could not be clearer when he adds that “TV is the only force that can unify and rule and bind this country. It’s the central mechanism of a new type of authoritarianism, one far subtler than twentieth-century strains.”

What Pomerantsev is describing is known as the Russian Television and Radio Broadcasting Network (RTRS), the government owned conglomerate formed in 2001. RTRS runs the state channels of Russia 1, Russia 2, and so forth and it hosts all “privately-owned” channels such as Gazprom Media. Gazprom Media, the media arm of the massive energy conglomerate, includes and hosts TNT, Turner Broadcasting System Russia, Fox News Russia, and many others. This media apparatus is perhaps better known more generally as the Ostankino, after the massive Ostankino tower built in the 1960s. It is from this tower, the World’s 8th largest, that the media center’s signal emanates.

Pomerantsev’s narrative also moves through a number of non-media saturated subjects such as corruption, religious sects, “gold diggers,” the growing urbanization of Moscow in particular, and many other facets of current Russian life. In the case of corruption, for example, Pomerantsev notes that “Russians have more words for ‘bribe’ than Eskimos do for ‘snow.’”

Yet he does not skim through these topics as if conducting some sort of showy tell-all. Rather, he writes with incredible richness of detail and with a respectable amount of reflection. Furthermore, he provides an insight that is unique and is likely only possible and accessible with both Russian language capacity and a Russian surname.

Pomerantsev’s solid and descriptive analyses of themes, both big and small, are provocative and informative. Moreover, considering that his subject matter consists of the lives of real people who encounter and endure corruption, and who also endure

living within a state masquerading as an emancipated free society, it is worthwhile to point out his compassion and his sympathy and frustration for their plight.

In a way, *Dead Souls* might have been a better title for this book had it not already been taken, because Pomerantsev's work reads like a post-modern reiteration of Nikolai Gogol. Indeed, readers will find *Nothing is True and Everything Is Possible* not only unsettling but also difficult to put down.

Captain Nathaniel L. Moir is a Psychological Operations and Military Intelligence Officer in the U.S. Army Reserves. He is currently also Senior Research Analyst with the Program for Culture and Conflict Studies at the Naval Postgraduate School. Captain Moir is a combat veteran of Afghanistan and recipient of the Bronze Star. His writing has appeared in numerous publications such as *Proceedings*, *Military Review*, *Prism*, *Army History*, *Military Intelligence Professional Bulletin*, *U.S. Naval Institute Press*, *Public Affairs Press*, and others.

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