

Ivan Petrov, Russia Through a Shot Glass

Books

by C.S. Walton
Garrett County Press; 247 pages; \$14
www.GCP.com

I have mixed feelings about this book. In terms of editing, the book has some problems. There is a typo here and there (e.g., pp. 78, 147), a footnote out of alignment (e.g., p. 78, again), and the incongruous cover. Specifically, the book is about a drunken sixty-something year old beggar. Yet the cover, for all its slickness, depicts a shot glass held by a clean finger nailed fellow wearing an Oxford and a sports jacket.

How to explain? The editor at GC Press emailed me that yes, this really is a picture of Ivan Petrov, and by the way, he isn't a beggar. O.K., he's not a beggar, he's a bum, a very cleaned up bum; a bum who at the book's end shows no sign of forgoing his drunken life on the street.

Now, in terms of content, this book does not aim at developing characters, pondering the mystery of life, or any such thing. Nor is the writing lyrical. Then again, that's not the aim.

What Ivan Petrov does is display with brutal honesty life in the Soviet Union for those who weren't members of the communist party. This is valuable, as it is social history.

Few Soviet citizens enjoyed the good life that party members did. While the latter ate well and held the best occupations, commoners bore the brunt of the ludicrous Soviet efforts at empire building. It was they who were forcibly thrown from their villages, exposed to toxic chemicals, and fed sporadically. Not surprisingly, being treated worse than a dog sowed cynicism in many citizens and fomented rampant alcoholism. Ivan Petrov, quirky as he is, nevertheless is very much a product of the system, albeit one whose paternity the

Soviets wouldn't have claimed.

Ivan is an utter drunk. By his late teens he is a hobo and he spends his life staggering from town to town, drinking, stealing when necessary, and getting thrown in and out of jails, labor camps; and detox clinics. Throughout readers are treated to scenes of alcoholic desperation, as Ivan and others drink bath tub vodka, paint thinner, surgical alcohol, booze distilled from tobacco, and anything else they could get their hand on.

Twisted characters pass in and out of Ivan's life like hallucinations. Excepting his wife, Olga, who leaves him on account of his drunkenness, all of them are wretches. Pasha Dyachkovsky," is one of the more monstrous. He is described as "a skilled hunter with luxuriant curving moustaches...[who] when drunk [would] wet his bed and then would beat his wife mercilessly."

C.S. Walton, a British bon vivant and writer, claims to have met Ivan Petrov during her travels in Russia and over two year period recorded his life story, from age 10 or so onward. Walton deserves accolades for this extensive reportorial legwork, which even includes providing five maps tracing Ivan's travels about the USSR.

This book is occasionally

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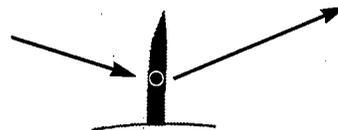
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amusing. Mostly, though, it turns the stomach. Few Americans, I dare say, can comprehend the horrific poverty, violence, and corruption of Russia under communist rule. Few now appreciate the current misery. Yes, Ivan Petrov was the creature of the now dead USSR. However, the post-communist era hasn't brought good times. Russia's economy has largely collapsed, poverty is more widespread than ever, and drunkenness is so severe that the male life expectancy has fallen steadily the past decade. Which means there are probably more Ivan Petrovs than ever, making this book all the more worth reading.

— Kevin R. Kosar

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