



OUT IN THE COLD

An American in the Soviet Union.

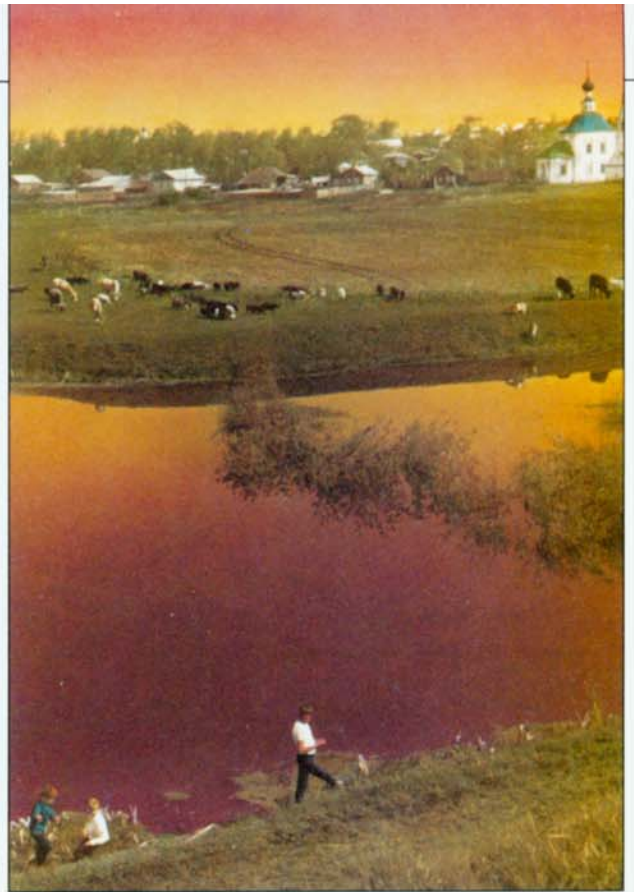
Photographs and text by Martha Casanave

The title photograph in the series "Out in the Cold — An American in the Soviet Union" shows me, the American tourist, forlorn and shivering in snow-covered Leningrad. This picture is both literal and metaphorical. Both the foreigner in Russia and the viewer of these images are, in a sense, left out or kept out: they never get the "real" picture.

The photographs, then, are not to be called documentary, and are not intended to inform Americans about Russia, at least not directly. Rather, the images are meant, by means of the unexpected and sometimes the absurd, to challenge American viewers' assumptions about the USSR. They also deal with how the Russians present themselves to foreigners. And they contain many references or clues to Russia's own history.

The photographs pose more questions than they supply answers. How is the image of an adversary styled and maintained? How closely is the adversarial image connected with reality? Can there be a consensual reality in cross-cultural politics? Is our idea of an adversary obsolete?

Now is a critical time in Soviet-American relations. Perestroika has created in Russia an atmosphere of hope, fear, upheaval and chaos. Americans are confused about what line of perception to take regarding Russia. In this age of change and of nuclear power, I question the relevance of stereotypes and adversarial polarization.





Martha Casanave's photography and portraits are represented in a number of major collections including The Polaroid Collection, Stanford Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art in New York (*The Image Continuum Journal*), and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Her work has also appeared in over 20 publications, including *American Photographer*, *Modern Photography* and *An American Family in Moscow*. Exhibits in which Casanave's work has been represented are too numerous to list but include shows across the United States, Europe and Japan. In 1979, Casanave won the Imogen Cunningham Award for her fine art photography. Today she lives in Monterey and works out of her home studio. Trained in Russian, Japanese, and Bulgarian, Casanave nonetheless used a foreigner's perspective when shooting the series "Out in the Cold — An American in the Soviet Union." Showing at Tager Gallery, 602 Mission St., Santa Cruz, January 2-February 24. Opening reception, January 8, 2-5 pm. ■



(11 times as of 2007)

I have been to Russia six times. As a person with a background in Russian studies and who speaks the language, I am not the typical tourist. Nevertheless, I am still a foreigner, an outsider looking not even in, but at the surface. As I accumulate photographs from the USSR, I am certain of only one thing — that what appears in my photographs won't reveal the real Russia.





As an American, I want to believe what I see. But nothing is so simple in Russia. Nothing is so black and white. This thought gave me the first clue that I might have to depart from my usual black and white photography.

The visitor to Russia needs above all to do some homework in advance. (Russians know a lot more about us than we know about them.) The visitor then needs to bring to Russia a sense of irony, and of humble good humor. The educated guest in the Soviet Union looks beneath the surface, but isn't surprised to find more obfuscating layers.

Perhaps the same thing could be said about any country. But there is something characteristic about the way Russians have always presented themselves to foreigners (and to themselves), and that something I call "Facade." Russians are masters of facade, geniuses at image-management — sometimes to the point of absurdity. But Russians take their absurdity very seriously.

The spirit of Russian image-management is embodied in the phrase "Potemkin village." In 1787 Gregory Potemkin, Catherine the Great's favorite, constructed elaborate fake settlements to impress foreign visitors. Common in English language usage, the phrase "Potemkin village" has come to mean an empty facade designed to create an illusion of substance.

These considerations led me to the decision to apply colors, often the "wrong" ones to my black and white prints. Roland Barthes, French sociologist, disliked color photography; to him the colors in photographs seemed "an artifice, a cosmetic." I wanted to use colors in literally that way, as a cosmetic. The colors might be artificial, but I would be staying true to the Russian tradition of image-management. Then I decided to re-photograph the painted prints, to enhance the illusion of reality, or at least to confuse the notion of it.

Russian style image-management, combined with sensationalizing and oversimplifying by the American press has further sabotaged information about the USSR. In early 1988, George Kennan wrote that "in this political world, artificially created images are considered more significant than realities..." I smiled when I read that, feeling glad that I for one am quite intentional about my artificially created images. This could be, ironically, the more honest approach, or at least the less pretentious.

In many of these images, my choice of colors was influenced by the Russian Symbolist writer Andrei Bely. In his 1916 novel *St. Petersburg*, the repetitive use of lurid colors, particularly red and orange, suggests a feeling of doom or violence — at that time a premonition of the revolutionary upheaval. Blood and fire are indeed pervasive elements throughout all of Russian history, both ancient (wooden Moscow burning, numberless times) and modern (the Revolution, the Siege of Leningrad, etc.). My photograph of the battered statue can signify the whole of Mother Russia. The Russian historical experience with bloodshed, an experience America does not share, colors the way Soviet citizens think about war and peace, and is another source of mutual misperception between the USSR and the US.

In keeping with the idea of facade, I have chosen subject matter that is often theatrical in nature. One form of theatre is the Dinner Party. Dinner parties are a way to allow guests into one's house but not into one's life. Laying the table for guests is a hospitality that precludes intimacy, an engineered event during which guests are simultaneously served and observed, and then talked about after they have gone back to their hotel. Dishes, food, clothing and behavior not common to everyday life are engaged for the dinner party and then put away.

The idea of turning inward or backward as an aspect of historical and contemporary Russian experience is expressed in my photographs in other ways as well. Some of the photographs suggest the Russian Orthodox church, or a pastoral, timeless kind of existence. The standing sunbather with patches on her eyes symbolizes, in a humorous way, vision turned inward, while her overt pose is an exaggerated styling of self for the foreigner. ■

