

Moscow's Old Normal

By [Alexei Bayer](#)

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I was born in Moscow in the mid-1950s, soon after Russia's capital entered a period of relative stability that lasted for nearly four decades. Before that, there had been nonstop turmoil since 1917 as the city expanded and its appearance, character and place in the nation changed dramatically. Its population kept turning over, be it because of a sudden influx of outsiders, purges, a war and new purges after the war.

But once Josef Stalin died in 1953, the city entered a calm period that allowed the backbone of its middle class to form. It became a remarkably close-knit group. We grew up in densely

packed communal apartments within the Garden Ring, later moving into apartment blocks further out of town, built for writers, musicians, scientists and KGB colonels. We spent our summers at dachas allocated by place of work or at summer camps sponsored by the Bolshoi Theater, the Radio Broadcasting Committee and other such organizations. We went to “special” schools that stressed foreign languages or mathematics and where admission was mainly by personal connections.

This may be the reason why the Soviet middle class remained so small — much smaller than in other countries — and so incestuous. But if you were lucky enough to have been born into it, you could never drop out. Having lived in the U.S. since 1974, I still know an extraordinary number of people in Moscow — something that never ceases to amaze my American wife.

Being the center of a highly centralized empire, Moscow continued to expand even during stable times. But since the early 1990s, it has entered a new period of frantic growth and social change. In fact, I no longer recognize the place where I grew up and, as I look at my friends, I often feel they don’t, either.

To be sure, today’s Moscow is a much more pleasant and exciting city. There are now restaurants, cafes and elegant shops, more theaters and art galleries than ever before, and streets and people’s apartments are more cheerful. The drab, unsmiling Soviet-era crowds are gone, hopefully for good. And yet, something from that era is still missing.

So, I decided to write about Moscow of my youth. I chose the form of a detective story, setting it in the early 1960s and, for authenticity, connecting a straightforward murder mystery with an infamous actual case of the time, the trial of the Rokotov gang of black market currency traders. My book, “Murder at the Dacha” has recently come out in English.

Russians my age who have read the Russian version, which will be published later this year, were keen to delve into the atmosphere of the time but wanted to correct what they saw as factual errors and anachronisms, even though I didn’t strive for historical accuracy. My editor at AST publishing house, an avid soccer fan, argued that in October 1962 her Torpedo soccer club didn’t play the Moscow Dinamo, as I describe in my book.

But the most interesting comments come from younger people. To them, the whole spirit of the city seemed alien: its crowded center, absence of traffic jams and references to the Noviy Cheryomushki neighborhood as remote outskirts. One reader found my description of the main character a parody. He simply couldn’t conceive of a cop as honest, modest and content to do his job. He thought it was some kind of a wicked, sardonic comment on the Moscow police.

Alexei Bayer, a native Muscovite, is a New York-based economist.

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