



An optimistic time: Russia of the '90s through the eyes of a U.S. journalist.

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From Under the Russian Snow is the name of the book written by Michelle Carter, an American journalist, about her work in Russia in 1995 when she was invited by the U.S. Information Agency to help Russian journalists in creating an independent media throughout Russia.

Carter had been coming regularly to the Soviet Union and then to Russia during the eight years before that trip. Michelle and her husband created the Children of Chernobyl Project of Northern California, which sent medicine and medical equipment to a hospital in Minsk. She is co-author of the book *Children of Chernobyl: Raising Hope from the Ashes*.

The tragic news about the death of Michelle's husband Laurie during a hiking trip in the Sierra Nevada Mountains came to her when she was in Russia. The book, *From Under the Russian Snow*, was written as a memoir. The author was trying to unite her experience and reflection of her work in Russia and her personal emotional suffering because of the loss of her spouse. They had been together for 28 years.

Michelle Carter answered Radio Liberty questions.

RL: What made you come to Russia, a country that seemed so unstable, unsafe and uncomfortable then?

Carter: I was enchanted by the Russian culture and learned Russian language in school. That is why, when I came to the USSR for the first time in 1988, I had a feeling that I had come home. That was an exchange visit organized by the Soviet Peace Committee. It was wonderful. I came for the second time in November 1990 when the Soviet Union started to crumble, and representatives of the Peace Committee wanted to get us away from Moscow so we could not communicate with those who were participating in protest movement. At that time I also visited Minsk and met a doctor who was treating children who suffered in the Chernobyl accident. My first book was a result of this acquaintance. The Russian desk of the U.S. Information Agency invited me to work in Moscow in 1995 after this book was published. I ran seminars for Russian journalists about how to organize an independent media, explaining the principles of its work and structure.

RL: Your new book has a very optimistic title *From Under the Russian Snow*. The book cover shows the flower *podснеzhnik* (snowdrops) coming through the snow, and it also puts you in a very optimistic mood. You are talking about years when the USSR and later Russia went from the Evil Empire to being quite friendly to the U.S. This situation lasted at least till the second half of 1990s. But now the US-Russian relations are as cold as never before. Why did that happen?

Carter: The current situation is very sad to me. I am confident that those who rule in the Kremlin now were trying to interfere in the U.S. domestic affairs, and this caused the dramatic worsening of relations. Though, on the human level, relations remain the same. My friends are still my friends

RL: There was a time when so-called people-to-people diplomacy played an important role in improving the U.S.-Soviet relations. Can it help now?

Carter: I think, yes. I was last in Russia last nine years ago, and there have been many changes since then. When people talk to each other over tea, it still works better than when the politicians argue. It is a friendly conversation. It is better to build bridges than tear them down. It is a pity that Russians have difficulties now in getting an American visa. If more Russians could come to visit the U.S., there would be a better understanding in Russia about what goes on in our home.

RL: Were there manifestations of anti-Americanism when you came in 1980-90s? Do you experience anti-American incidents now?

Carter: I did not feel any anti-Americanism in 1995. Everyone was very optimistic about new perspectives. I traveled all around Russia with my seminars/lectures on journalism, and everywhere I went I received a heartfelt welcome. The same was true in my everyday life with my neighbors. My Moscow neighbors in the building where I lived were very kind, and actually they became my family in Russia. Now in private conversations, I hear that America with its aggressiveness threatens Russian interests. When I replied that my Estonian friends are nervous about a Russian invasion, the response was that Russia must react to NATO threats on its borders. The hottest debates erupted about the Crimean annexation when I was trying to explain that the U.S. considers the Ukraine an sovereign state, and it's unacceptable to take its territories,

even if the majority of the Crimea population wanted to be part of Russia. Discussions and debates became more tense, compared to any of my previous visits.

RL: Do you think the anti-Americanism you experience now is connected with the situation of free press in Russia? How is it different now compare to 1990s in Russia? You describe that period as a “flourishing of Russian press” in your book.

Carter: The problem now is the dissemination of fake news. A lot of media reporting simply does not match reality. As to the Soviet and Russian journalism of ‘80-‘90s, after many years of total state control, censorship and self-censorship, the press was emerging with new freedom. I did my best to explain to journalists that one of their major tasks is to be free in their reporting, be independent. I offered strategies to cope with the stranglehold the state printing houses and newspaper distribution systems had on independent newspapers. I talked about creating a newspaper, which is controlled by the journalists, making a newspaper which readers would like to buy, which would be interesting to read, which would be good for investment, which would enforce honest journalism. It was the right time then, a time of great hope. I do not see such optimism now, especially not the desire to fight for independent journalism. Media is in hands of a very narrow circle of people. Journalists here don’t deal with censorship in its classical understanding, but rather a form of self-censorship as journalists remember who pays their wages and prefer not to cross the line.

RL: There is a discussion still now about the time when Russian journalism embarked on the path which it follows now. Some say that it happened when Putin came to power; others, say it was in 1996 before the presidential elections, when all leading TV channels openly supported Boris Yeltsin. What do you think about it? In general, did you expect that Russian press would be just like an American one?

Carter: I never believed that the Russian press should copy an American model. I keep in mind typical objectivism inherent American media when I talk about an American model, in which the press strives to remove itself from the events it reports. It aims to present different points of view. Opinions you will find only in op/ed columns. This is very different from the European media, which takes a certain position on events. Russian media could adopt a European model as well. As to the path the Russian media is now following, it started with the concentration of leading media in hands of a few powerful oligarchs in 1996-97, before Putin came to power. I recall a single date, Oct. 7, 2006, when journalist Anna Politkovskaya was killed. Politkovskaya’s obituary was an obituary of the independent Russian media.

RL: What is the main message of your book? Who is it addressed to? Why did you write it now? Why did you choose the memoir genre?

I chose the memoir genre because it is a very personal story. This is, first of all, a letter to my children; it is a story about what I was doing 10,000 miles away from my home when my husband died. It was a very difficult time for me, but I was in a circle of people and wonderful friends who took care of me. At the same time, I wanted to write about the events that were happening in Russian society, in Russian press at that time. It took me 20 years to understand how to combine these two narratives in my book. As you noted, I use symbols of hope and

revival, the *pod snezhnik*, in the title and on the book cover. I wanted to say in the book that you cannot give up the hope, not when have you own personal difficulties, not when the society has a difficult period. I believe that in both cases, everything can change, for the better.