

LETTER FROM SOCHI

PATRIOT GAMES

Vladimir Putin lives his Olympic dream.

BY DAVID REMNICK

A quarter century ago, as jubilant citizens took sledgehammers to the Berlin Wall, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, an officer in the Dresden station of the K.G.B., fed a raging furnace with the documentary evidence of Soviet espionage activities in East Germany. Putin was grateful for his Dresden posting. He had grown up in

a pretty wife and two young daughters, and enough leisure to play Ping-Pong, fish in the rivers outside town, and drink beer in the city's pubs and breweries. He drank so much beer that he gained twenty-five pounds. Now the happy days were ending. The Wall had been breached, and Putin was shoveling top-secret files into the fire so

few months, Putin slipped back home to Leningrad and took a position as "vice-rector"—the residential spy—at the local university.

As the Soviet Union began to unravel, there was a pervasive mood of desperation in its most repressive offices. Occasionally, that desperation took on comic dimensions. One fall morning in 1990, when I was working as a Moscow correspondent, I was reading a stack of newspapers—a requirement of the job—and came across an article of tangy interest in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. The headline read "MISS K.G.B."; below was a photograph of a woman in her twenties, named Katya Mayorova, provocatively adjusting the strap of her bulletproof vest. She had, it seemed, won a beauty



Putin's aim was to put on a display of renewed national confidence and modernity. "Russia is back," officials kept insisting.

Leningrad, an uneven student with early dreams of serving the state. One of his grandfathers was a cook for Lenin and Stalin. His father was an undercover operative during the war. Putin's parents barely survived the Nazi siege; an older brother did not. After a rough upbringing, Putin had enjoyed a halcyon four years in Dresden. He had

quickly, he recalled in a book-length interview, that "the furnace burst." This was early in November, 1989. Later, angry Germans threatened to break into the K.G.B. compound. Putin's superiors called Moscow for reinforcements, but, he says, "Moscow was silent." The state was failing even its most resolute foot soldiers. Within a

contest at Lubyanka, the K.G.B. headquarters. This was new. I took a sip of coffee. The article described how Comrade Mayorova wore her vest with "exquisite softness, like a Pierre Cardin model." Beyond "mere beauty," her talents included the ability to deliver a karate kick "to her enemies' head." I called Lubyanka, which, by now, had a press

PASCAL LE SEGRETAIN/GETTY

office, and asked if I might interview Katya Mayorova. The press officer was effusive: Why not? Bring a camera! On the appointed day, I went to Lubyanka, where Comrade Mayorova explained to me that the K.G.B.'s beauty contest, such as it was, took place in "private." She was wearing an angora sweater. She liked the Beatles. She worked as a secretary, but was certified in the handling of small arms. "They try to give us all-around skills," she said. Assured once more, if in an unexpected form, that the Soviet Union was in a state of mortal delirium, I thanked Katya and took my leave. A year later, the statue outside Lubyanka of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the Soviet secret police, dangled from a noose held by a crane. After a short while, "Iron Felix" toppled to the ground, where protesters hacked away at his metallic corpse, the better to bring home a jagged souvenir of the recent past.

Great powers seldom retreat forever. But, to the people who suffer their fall, the sense of diminishment is acute. For Russians, the end of the Soviet Union was not merely a new charter, a new flag, a new set of lyrics to an old anthem. There were plenty, in the cities, mainly, who rejoiced in the liberating sense of possibility—the open borders, the cultural ferment, the democratic potential—but for many millions of their compatriots, Putin among them, the collapse launched a decade of humiliation, marked by geopolitical, economic, and cultural disarray. In 1999, as Yeltsin handed the Presidency over to him, Putin said, "Russia is in the midst of one of the most difficult periods in its history. For the first time in the past two or three hundred years, it is facing a real threat of sliding into the second, and possibly even third, echelon of world states."

Putin's lament had nothing to do with any fealty to Communism. Even Leonid Brezhnev, who presided over the Party and the country from 1964 to 1982, began privately calling Leninist ideology *tryakhomudiya*—a term of derision that might best be translated as "crapola." What the regime and its supporters valued in its last years was not Marxism-Leninism but, rather, power, a sense of greatness that was slipping

away. Huge oil reserves, and the vast arsenal of weapons that the oil helped pay for, had for years masked the hollowness of the entire enterprise. As early as 1975, Brezhnev worried that the country would not be able to make good on its promise to host the 1980 Summer Olympics, in Moscow. (The Soviet Union, decrying the pernicious "bourgeois individualism" of competitive sports, did not even take part in the Games until 1952.) "This event will cost colossal amounts of money," Brezhnev wrote to one of his successors, Konstantin Chernenko, in a document that has only lately come to light. "Some comrades have suggested to me that if we pay a small fine we could get out of this." In the event, more than sixty countries, led by the United States, boycotted the Moscow Games, in protest over the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

For Putin, however, the Olympics remained a marker of national prestige. In 1996, when he was a deputy mayor of St. Petersburg, he led an effort to secure the 2004 Summer Olympics for the city. The mission failed. St. Petersburg did not make the final ballot. The loss seems only to have deepened his resolve. When Putin became President, he set out to stabilize Russian authority, and he did so in the time-honored manner: seizing command of regional governorships; cracking down on political opposition; taking complete control of the legislature, the courts, and state television. But he also looked for ways to revive the national spirit. "The general state of society is one of dejection and pessimism," he said later. "We need to cheer up."

As part of this effort, Putin, working with some of the wealthiest magnates in the country, pursued the Olympics again. He focussed on the 2014 Winter Games, which were up for consideration at a meeting of the International Olympic Committee in Guatemala in 2007. The I.O.C., which has a history of financial receptivity and political amorality, awarded the 2014 Games to Russia over South Korea by a narrow vote. The committee members could not have been persuaded by Sochi as such. The city, subtropical and until lately underdeveloped, was known as a place for convalescence during the Second World War and as a vacation spot

for mid-level apparatchiks. Stalin kept a dacha compound there called Green Grove, and Putin now has a lavish spread in the area.

When I arrived in Sochi for the Games, I made my way along the new promenade by the Black Sea. While friends and family texted scenes of New York encrusted in snow and ice, Sochi was usually between fifty and sixty degrees during the day. This was turning the snow in the mountains to vichyssoise, but it was a delight near the sea.

One morning, I turned left out of my hotel gate and walked along the Black Sea promenade toward Abkhazia. I passed a stout Russian woman wearing an Olympic sweat suit, her hair dyed a shade of pumpkin. She was surrounded by skating pupils, sneaker-wearing girls between five and nine, who were practicing figure-skating turns and leaps that they would later try on ice. Still breathing hard from their exertions, they took a rest and talked about Yulia Lipnitskaya, the fifteen-year-old Russian who had helped her team win gold the night before. They set about trying to imitate the curve of Lipnitskaya's back, her triple Axels and Salchows; it was like watching the kids at a batting cage in the Bronx try to swing like Derek Jeter.

Farther on, past strolling visitors from Moscow and Novosibirsk ("It's so warm here!"), past exhausted construction workers taking long cigarette breaks on benches, I walked down a ramp to the rocky beach. At the shoreline, there were fishermen, dozens of them, standing at ten-yard intervals and casting long spinning rods into the metallic throb of the sea. There were ducks on the surface, a good sign for the fishermen.

"We'll have enough for dinner before lunch," one of them said.

Most smoked and cast their lines in silence. The occasional bubbles of conversation were about fishing—what was biting, how often, matters of territory, technique, and equipment. They seemed to pay the Games no mind. Nearby, a squat man with a southern accent—an accent like Mikhail Gorbachev's, in which the hard "g"s get overlaid with airy "h"s—let loose a harangue

about his neighbor's alleged encroachment. If he used any idiom beyond "Back the fuck off" and "Fuck your mother," I did not catch it.

I walked over to the last fisherman—and then there was the fence. Beyond was Abkhazia, a region considered "independent" by Russia and a breakaway province by Georgia; it has been a scene of post-Soviet battle and ethnic cleansing. And it is just one corner of a perilous region where Putin and the International Olympic Committee thought to situate the Winter Games. The Caucasus—the region that takes in the mountains adjoining Sochi, Georgia, North and South Ossetia, Ingushetia, Dagestan, Chechnya—has played a violent and romantic role in the Russian imagination for centuries, akin to that of the American Wild West. A region of countless languages and ethnicities, it was, for Pushkin, a place where "martial robbery occurs and the savage genius of inspiration is hiding in mute silence." It has been the scene of imperial conquest and rebellion, bandit raids and battle. Now it's where Islamic radicalism is at more or less permanent war with Putin's security forces and with local, pro-Moscow governments. And it's where Putin, at the cost of at least fifty billion dollars—colossal *otkаты*, or kickbacks, included—has built eleven new sporting venues, a Formula One track, forty-nine hotels, twenty-two tunnels, fifty-four bridges, a railroad to

put the Acela to shame, a cathedral, a hospital. To do it, he enlisted thousands of migrant workers from Central Asia and displaced two thousand families. His enemies have not wished the project well. Doku Umarov, the most bloody-minded of the Islamist combatants and the self-proclaimed emir of the "Caucasus Emirate," declared that the Games were "satanic dancing on the bones of our ancestors, on the bones of the many, many Muslims killed" by Russia in the region; he vowed to "derail" them. But, as the Games progressed, Putin's "ring of steel"—tens of thousands of troops and police, along with drones and security cameras—proved sufficient. These were Putin's Games.

Sochi was a theatrical event before it was a sporting event. Putin's aim was to put on an international display of confidence and modernity. "The Games are his baby," Dmitry Chernyshenko, the head of the Sochi Olympic Organizing Committee, said. Sochi will be "a blueprint for the rest of the country to follow." Putin built a vast Olympic Park on swampy land—an echo of Peter the Great's building his grand westward-looking city on the swamps of the Neva River—precisely because of the daring it involved. "We need to understand and feel that we are capable of pulling off major large-scale projects," Putin said. Not since the

Soviets laid out the twenty-six hundred miles of the Baikal-Amur railroad in Siberia and the Far East, more than a generation ago ("the construction project of the century," it was called), had a Kremlin leader proposed something of such scale.

Not everything went according to plan. The failure to complete all the hotels in the mountains, particularly the hotels where many journalists were meant to stay, created a P.R. debacle. Before there were any events to write about, the Twitter hashtag #SochiProblems and outlets like CNN drew bountiful reports of broken toilets, double toilets, no toilets at all, brown water, yellow water, lobbies with no floors, showers with no water. And there were the dogs. Western reporters were taken with sightings of "wild dogs" in the streets and, alternately, cruel purges of homeless hounds. The mockery reached the point of neo-Cold War Schadenfreude. Vladislav Tretiak, the three-time gold-medal hockey goalie of a generation ago, had to remind an interviewer that, at the 1980 Winter Olympics, in Lake Placid, New York, he and other Olympians were put up in a barracks-like building that was later used as a federal prison.

Such distractions were peripheral to Putin's grand vision. "Russia is back," officials kept insisting. Amid all the brutality and corruption of his regime, his historical mission has been to assert himself as the country's singular, irreplaceable leader and to reclaim Russia's globe-besiding status. In Putin's eyes, Russia had allowed the West to humiliate it, by expanding NATO to its frontiers, by luring former Soviet republics—especially Ukraine—westward, by bombing Serbia and Kosovo, and, as the self-proclaimed power in a unipolar world, by dancing in the end zone at every opportunity. Sochi was meant to put a stop to all that. It wasn't about "slope style" snowboarding; it was about the televised revival of a demoralized country.

Putin presided with all his accustomed bravado. He is an autocrat who does not defy his cartoon; he draws it, stroke by broad stroke. He is the frenetic macho, who flies a fighter jet into Chechnya, rides a horse bare-chested, tranquilizes a Siberian tiger,



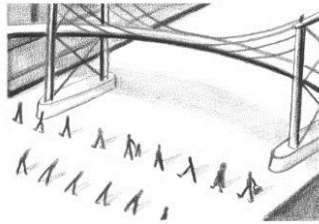
hang-glides with cranes, drives a Formula One car, rides with a motorcycle gang, skates with the Russian hockey team, skis the Caucasus, shoots a whale with a crossbow, and dives into the sea in search of archeological treasures. After years of gerontocrats and an incapacitated drunk, the man who rules Russia projects vitality. He divorces his wife and is said to have taken up with an elastic Olympian—a rhythmic gymnast!—named Alina Kabaeva, a woman so flexible she can lean backward and dribble a soccer ball with her head. His habits of mind are rooted in his K.G.B. history. His language is uncompromising and sometimes crude. Concerning the Chechen rebels, he has declared his intention to “corner the bandits in the shithouse and wipe them out.” To his supporters, Putin is a modern *muzhik*, a real man.

Putin could not guarantee gold medals for Olympic athletes, but he could control the Olympic spectacle. The perfect embodiment of Putinism in Sochi was the opening ceremony. At the 2008 Olympics, in Beijing, the Chinese underlined the nation’s dramatic emergence, its sense of itself as the great power of the twenty-first century, with a dazzling opening conceived and directed by the filmmaker Zhang Yimou. The two-part artistic program—“Brilliant Civilization,” depicting the epochs of Chinese history, and “Glorious Era,” which seemed to make a point about peaceful coexistence with the rest of the world—was a phantasmagoria of fireworks, L.E.D. displays, and thousands of performers moving in astonishing synchronicity.

The Chinese rehearsed their opening ceremony for almost a year. The Russians, in true Russian fashion, crashed their program. They had hoped to begin rehearsing in Fisht Olympic Stadium last August, but the stadium was not ready until December. The computer programmers, who were essential to the aerial spectaculars and the preposterously sophisticated gantry system that ran across the roof, had asked for six months of preparation; they got six weeks. George Tsybin, an émigré theatre and opera designer who worked on the Sochi production, knew just how many ways an ambitious theatrical production with countless moving parts

could go wrong. His résumé includes “Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark.”

One of the most curious of the performances came in the half hour before the opening ceremony began. The Russian pop duo t.A.T.u., now well past their sell-by date, sang their hit “Not Gonna Get Us.” At the urging of their hype-happy manager, the duo used to kiss onstage, hinting broadly that they were lesbian lovers. Eventually, they were outed as straight. Considering all



the controversy surrounding Putin’s anti-gay-propaganda law, their presence could be read as a message of sorts, though it was unclear what the message might have been. Stranger still was the sight of the Interior Ministry police choir singing Daft Punk’s hit “Get Lucky.” The Interior Ministry police are not a happy presence at a Moscow political demonstration—think Chicago police, circa August, 1968—and their headquarters, 38 Petrovka Street, is an ominously resonant address. This was Sochi’s “Springtime for Stalin” moment: giddy tenors in the uniforms of notorious enforcers.

The official ceremony began with a projection of all the letters of the Cyrillic alphabet, each letter standing for something quintessentially Russian: “P for Pushkin,” and so on. There was nothing quite so bold as “S for Solzhenitsyn” or “B for Babel”: no hint of the Gulag. Still, many of the honored names—Chagall, Kandinsky, Nabokov, Stravinsky—were émigré avant-gardists who were, in their time, considered traitors to the Motherland.

The “parade of nations,” a long procession of national teams, posed one question: Would any of the athletes make a show of solidarity with gays and lesbians—a raised fist, say, in a rainbow glove? Belle Brockhoff, an Australian snowboarder, talked plainly of being a lesbian and of her opposition to the

Russian legislation, but she had already said that she wasn’t going to do “anything crazy,” like carry a rainbow flag into Fisht Stadium. No one dared.

Putin supervised the proceedings closely. He had put Konstantin Ernst, the producer who runs Channel One, the largest of the state-run television channels, in charge of the opening ceremony, and he attended several rehearsals. Ernst and Putin met regularly, examining models, discussing ideas and limits. According to a study of post-Soviet film and television by the historian Stephen M. Norris, Ernst has specialized in arousing a new Russian patriotism with film spectaculars that view the collapse of empires as tragedies and highlight the brighter moments of Soviet times. This Putinesque impulse, the search for a usable past, however fantastical, was at the center of Ernst’s opening ceremony.

Eventually, Ernst and Tsybin trimmed back some of their ambitions. Valery Gergiev, the conductor and Putin’s friend, was supposed to appear with a symphony orchestra inside a “chandelier” as large as a five-story building—a “kinetic sculpture.” That didn’t quite work for the opening, and the construction was put in a hangar. There was a plan to have everyone in the stadium hold up a picture of one of the twenty-some million Soviets who died in the Second World War, but the I.O.C. felt that that was too political, and the Russians agreed to drop it.

In a rehearsal I saw a few days before the opening, the biggest goof came when only two horses of an intended troika appeared. Early in the actual ceremony, five illuminated snowflakes were supposed to transform into the five Olympic rings. Only four managed the trick, providing Twitter with more Schadenfodder and presenting Konstantin Ernst’s team with a split-second decision. Russian TV was called on to cut away from the sight of the failed Olympic ring and to a taped rehearsal when all five rings opened. “We had so many mishaps along the way—it’s normal,” Tsybin told me. “It takes months and months to fine-tune a system like that. We had six weeks. It’s just a miracle that the show took place at all.”

“Zen Buddhists have this idea that when you have a perfectly polished

sphere, you should leave a notch in it so you can understand just how perfectly it is polished,” Ernst told the *Daily Telegraph* the next day. “In technical terms, the rings were the simplest thing in the whole show. They turned out to be our notch. . . . This is certainly bad, but it does not humiliate us.”

Ernst and Tsy-pin’s main event was a toboggan run through Russian history. An Olympic opening ceremony is to history what the Ice Capades are to “The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire”—Gibbon on Ice!—but the stylized drama revealed something about the leadership’s conception of the country and of itself. Bring on the snow fairies and the candy-colored onion domes. (You were expecting the purges?) “We were not showing a real country,” Tsy-pin told me later. “We were showing a dream, an ideal.” Imperial Russia was represented by a courtly ballet, “Natasha Rostova’s First Ball,” from “War and Peace,” with stars of the Bolshoi and Mariinsky Ballets. It was the purest, most exquisite set piece of the night. The Revolution was represented by jagged avant-garde images—Malevich as a kind of aerial parade float—and by an enormous chugging agitprop train, spreading the word of the Bolsheviks. Industrialization looked like a halftime show at the Tostitos Fiesta Bowl, the postwar years like a Slavic production of “American Graffiti,” complete with boxy cars and *stilyagi*, duck-tailed hipsters, cutting a rug. A dream, an ideal. The only leader mentioned explicitly was Peter the Great: no Lenin or Stalin, no Gorbachev or Yeltsin. It was a pop-cultural representation of a sentiment whose classic formulation was delivered by Count Alexander von Benckendorff, the head of the secret police under Nicholas I: “Russia’s past is admirable; her present is more than magnificent; as to her future, it is beyond the grasp of the most daring imagination.”

This is, effectively, Putin’s historical credo, and it has prompted him to reverse certain advances of previous generations. Two pivotal moments in the postwar Soviet Union were Khrushchev’s repudiation of Stalinism, in 1956, and a speech given by Gorbachev in 1987, which, ostensibly

celebrating Leninist principles, took Khrushchev’s opening up of the past many steps further. When Gorbachev sanctioned the publication of Solzhenitsyn’s “The Gulag Archipelago,” a Dantesque excursion into the vast network of Soviet prison camps, he undermined the lies upon which his own regime rested; the exposure of Soviet history spelled the end of Soviet history.

Throughout the Yeltsin years, in the nineteen-nineties, new textbooks appeared in Russian schools with chapters on the Soviet past that sometimes resembled Solzhenitsyn more than they did the approved texts of previous generations. Putin saw the new textbooks as a *kasba*, a muddle—a capitulation to Russia’s detractors. At a televised meeting with history teachers, in 2007, Putin insisted that Russia had “nothing to be ashamed of,” and that the pedagogical task was to make students “proud of their motherland.” He allowed that Russia’s past included “grim chapters,” but whose did not? “No one must be allowed to impose the feeling of guilt on us.”

The creation of an alternative past was integral to Putin’s mission. The Kremlin-backed “A Modern History of Russia: 1945-2006: A Manual for History Teachers” urges a “balanced” view of Stalin. Stalin’s repressions are taken note of, but are placed in the “context” of mobilization for war with Germany. The book regards the fall of the Soviet Union, in 1991, as a tragic error: “The Soviet Union was not a democracy, but it was an example for millions of people around the world of the best and fairest society.” Gorbachev, ceding independence to Eastern and Central Europe, is dismissed as pathetically weak. The hero of modern Russian history in this narrative is, of course, Putin himself.

Just as Stalin approved, and wrote part of, the “Short Course” on the history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Putin commissioned guidelines for new Russian history and new textbooks. He has become an amateur scholar of world history. At a four-hour press conference in December, he said, “Can you tell me what is the big difference between Cromwell and Stalin? There is none. From the

point of view of the liberal part of our political establishment, they’re both bloody dictators. The former was actually a very cunning man who played a somewhat controversial part in the history of Britain. However, his monument is there. Nobody is tearing it down. . . . We have to treat every period of our history with care. It’s best, of course, not to create any commotion, not to blow people’s minds with some untimely actions that could divide society.”

The promulgation of a “national idea”—a triumphalist, unifying vision of a usable past—has been a particular concern of Putin’s since his return to the Presidency, in 2012. It is hardly a systematic vision. He quotes a miscellany of Russian philosophers and politicians—Ivan Ilyin, Nikolai Berdyaev, Pyotr Stolypin—who sit together in about as much accord as Hobbes, Locke, and Gramsci. Nor is it an ideology enforced in the way of the Staliner Soviet Union, with its institutions of indoctrination and control. Putinism is more eclectic and contradictory, although it inclines toward absolutism. As Nikolai Karamzin, the great Russian historian of two centuries ago, put it, “Autocracy has founded and resuscitated Russia. Any change in its political constitution has led in the past and must lead in the future to its perdition.”

There are recurring strands in Putin’s conservatism: a resentment of Western sermonizing and meddling in Russia and its sphere of political influence; a belief in the primacy of the state over the individual; a vision of Russian Orthodoxy as a quasi-official faith and as a locus of “traditional Russian values.” Having crushed the protest movements of two years ago, Putin sought to consolidate his base, Russia’s “silent majority,” and keep its loyalty through the mind-numbing use of state-run television, which spreads his ideals of patriotism and state power. The arrest and show trials of the punk-rock protesters Pussy Riot and the enactment of the anti-gay-propaganda law were demonstrations of that effort. Although Russians are hardly puritanical—the rates of abortion and divorce are among the highest

in the world—Putin recognized that they are decidedly homophobic, and that he could use this to advantage. Gays and lesbians, as well as those immoralists who would support their decadent ways, are a convenient “other.” Indeed, the Church leadership considers homosexuality a sign of the Apocalypse, a view that has been aired with some frequency on television.

Last December, in a speech to the Federal Assembly, Putin combined a realistic sense of Russia’s reduced place in the world with an insistence on its elevated moral standing. “We do not claim to be any sort of superpower,” he said, but added that the West accepts “without question the equality of good and evil” and endorses a brand of tolerance that is “neutered and barren.” To follow the West blindly was a path to “a primitive state.” Putin has said that it is his job to shield Russia from “the rather aggressive behavior of certain social groups,” and from the “quasi-values” of the West, which are “very hard for our people to accept.”

Like so many on the American and the European far right, Putin warns that the West has been rejecting the “Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization.” An insidious cosmopolitanism lurks within the exponents of such decay. “They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual,” he has said. “They are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with the belief in Satan. The excesses of political correctness have reached the point where people are seriously talking about registering political parties whose aim is to promote pedophilia. . . . And people are aggressively trying to export this model all over the world. I am convinced that this opens a direct path to degradation and primitivism, resulting in a profound demographic and moral crisis.” Such rhetoric—exquisitely rendered both on state television and on the English-language propaganda channel, RT—has earned Putin approbation not only from Russian religious conservatives but also from some American ones. In an article titled “Is Putin One of Us?” Pat Buchanan praised the Russian President’s



“Sometimes I feel like the only thing keeping us together is our fear of the children.”

“moral clarity” and suggested that he could help lead a kind of global conservative bloc.

In the run-up to the Olympics, Putin went to some lengths to sheathe the razor edge of his re-moralization agenda. He released some political prisoners. Some of the migrant workers who had been stiffed in Sochi got paid. And, once the Games got going, you could spend many hours concentrating on sports that most people revisit only every four years. I saw the American women, led by killer twins from North Dakota, crush some hapless Swiss in hockey so thoroughly that it seemed right to send a card. I watched curling, and found it almost as riveting as I had remembered it. I watched the “kiss and cries” at team figure skating. For a while, Sochi, which looks like Orlando-sur-Mer, seemed like an extravaganza anywhere: buttoned up, locked down, corporate, and best followed on television.

But, while the Olympics were airing across Russia, heretics who dared to question the canonical view of history wound up in trouble. When Dozhd (Rain), a small, independent TV station, put out a poll asking viewers whether the Soviet leadership should have surrendered Leningrad during the

siege rather than suffer the loss of hundreds of thousands of people, the station lost its cable operators. When the satirist Viktor Shenderovich, writing on the Web site of the independent radio station Ekho Moskvy (Echo of Moscow), dared to compare the Sochi Olympics to the Berlin Olympics, in 1936, he was vilified, and, within a few days, a video of Shenderovich masturbating—a video that everyone understood to be the work of the Russian secret services—made its way onto state television.

Finally, in the second week of competition, women from Pussy Riot showed up in town to scrape at the Potemkin village’s wet paint and plaster. About twenty miles from the Olympic Park, they came out onto the street in their fluorescent balaclavas and tried to perform a song called “Putin Will Teach You to Love the Motherland.” Cossacks, once known in Russia for their taste for pogroms and now empowered as law enforcement, put a rough stop to the performance. They set upon the women with horsewhips. In a pure expression of Putinism, a Cossack smashed Pussy Riot’s guitar. ♦

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A conversation with David Remnick.

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