

THE ICE MELTS

The photographer CARL DE KEYZER spent two years studying life in the Soviet Union. NORMAN STONE looks at his photographs for clues to the nation that will emerge from the present period of upheaval

Is any country's history a serious guide to its present? This is a difficult enough question to ask about England or Scotland, which have so vastly changed their character in the past generation. The institutions have continued; has the mentality?

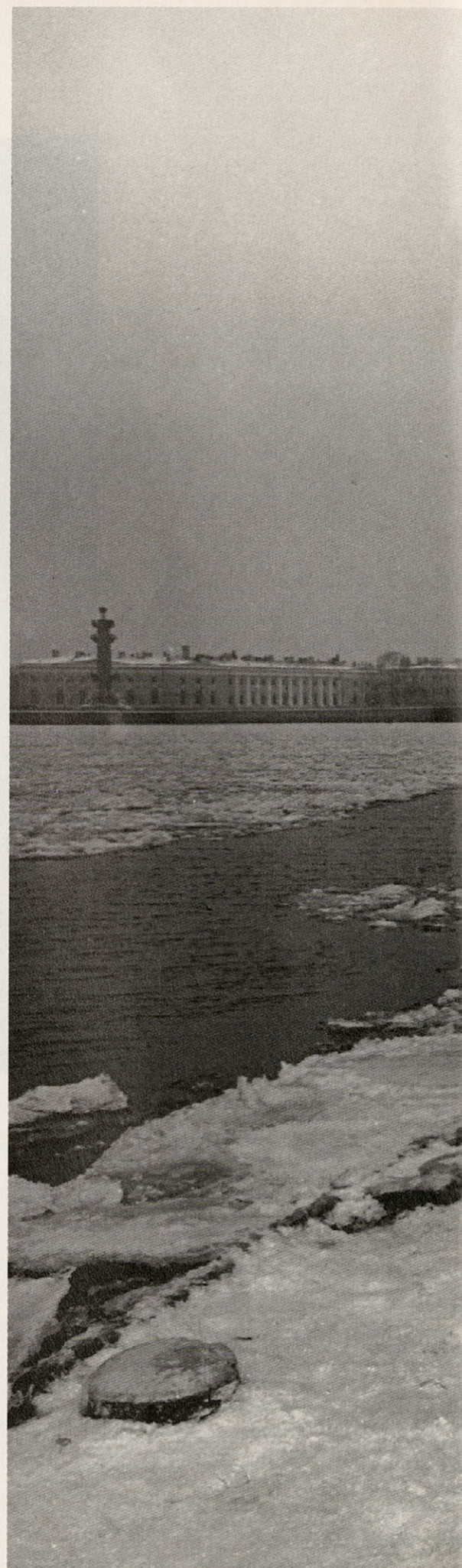
When I look at these photographs by Carl De Keyzer, I ask the same question about Russia. Here are ordinary Soviet citizens going about various affairs. It all looks innocuous enough. Soviet life in 1988-89 – the years in which De Keyzer recorded his images – is more snowy, more uniformed, much less prosperous, more regimented than our own in the West. But, even in Bratsk, in Siberia – when you think of it, not far from the borders of China – or in Yerevan, capital of Armenia,

here is another version of Europe. De Keyzer obviously responded very well to the definitely European part of the Soviet Union – Leningrad in particular. His eye has been caught by two elderly women in bathing-costumes, in the snow, on the frozen Neva. The site is one of the great historical ones of Europe: the women are just outside what seems to be the Trubetskoy Bastion of the Peter-Paul Fortress, from where you look across the Neva to a grand assemblage of buildings, mainly neo-classical – the Winter Palace, Senate, Admiralty – with the dome of St Isaac's Cathedral dominating the skyline.

But what can the two women be doing in bathing-costumes in a season such as this? And what is one of them doing with a



Above: Young recruits commemorate victory in the Second World War with a parade in Samarkand, Uzbekistan



Right: Winter bathers, known in Leningrad as 'walrus', prepare to take a dip in the ice-clad River Neva



Above: Bathers drying in the sun at a swimming pool on the river in Yerevan, Armenia, where intellectuals and artists meet to play chess and discuss politics



Left: Children playing on a building site in Bratsk, Siberia

Far left: Fishing in makeshift shelters through holes in the ice on the Gulf of Finland, with Leningrad in the background

Despite the apparent drabness of life in Russia, the educated classes are astounding: well-read, good at music, interested in everything. My colleague Geoffrey Hosking has just written a book, based on his Reith Lectures of two years ago, in which he points to this paradox. You set out to see Russian friends, sliding through the snow, being jostled by vast crowds of shabby, ill-fed people to an over-crowded tram with a rude conductress. You arrive at some awful concrete building, in an estate stretching out for grim square miles; there is a smell of cabbage and old shoes; there are drunks and mangy dogs. Once inside the friend's flat, you then have the conversation of your lifetime – the kind of old-fashioned versatility and breadth of interest that is almost extinct in the West. Yet, outside, there is the grey and poor world of the Iron Curtain. The paradox is mysterious, but it is also an old one in Russian history. Even in the days of Peter the Great or Catherine the Great, let alone

those of Nicholas I, Western visitors wondered how it came about that a country ostensibly so backward and tyrannically governed could produce an intelligentsia of such power, and be very good indeed at producing some things, but very bad at producing others.

De Keyzer's photographs are not about history, but history is in them just the same. How each country translates its past into its present is impossible to explain, since so much depends on impressionism. In the Russian case, it is all the more difficult because Lenin did, after all, set out to create a new world and Stalin uprooted so much of the old Russia "of ikons and cockroaches" (as Trotsky called it). Certainly, there were some important things in old Russia which made the country readier for Communism, and some of these things still make life very difficult for would-be Communist reformers. Orthodoxy, quite unlike Protestantism, was never concerned with progress upon this earth; it taught

resignation, and was not greatly concerned with minor, as distinct from major, virtues. Chastity, sobriety, thrift and so forth do not figure as they do in the religion of the West. In the same way, individual rights of various sorts, property in particular, were far less in evidence than in the West.

One day, when Soviet archives and libraries are open more readily than in the past, there will be a good book to be written about the links between Russian past and Soviet present. But there is one feature of the past which, nowadays, most people seem to expect to recur. For vast amounts of time, the Russians put up with things in the style of "Asiatic resignation". Seeing them at over-crowded Kiev station or Kiev airport, with the long delays, the endless little bags and suitcases done up in string, you think that they will never rebel.

But there is a Russian tradition in which all of a sudden the "dark people", as they used to be called, run amok. Is that going to happen again, as it has not happened



since the Revolution and the Civil War of 1917-21? There are times when I suspect that De Keyzer's photographs may soon count as images of another world. The events of the past three years in the Soviet empire have been astounding – the most remarkable since the end of the Second World War. Every day brings another headline – civil war in the Caucasus, secession of Lithuania from the USSR, the defection of Central Europe from Comecon. The implosion is now reaching into Russia proper. The innocents in De Keyzer's photographs will, I fear, be witnesses to a new Time of Troubles, when this great country goes through a deep crisis, as in the decades that followed the death of Boris Godunov, before establishing a new, powerful identity. ●

Right: A soldier reads his oath of loyalty to the state at a ceremony in Gorky Park, Moscow

Below: Street scene in the ancient city of Tashkent, capital of Uzbekistan

