

*Opposite page: Between Two
Fires: Truth, Ambition, and
Compromise in Putin's Russia*
Joshua Yaffa
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REPORTING ON RUSSIA'S GRAY AREA

JOSHUA YAFFA IN PROFILE

BY MASHA UDENSIVA-BRENNER

It was by no means surprising that when the *New Yorker's* Moscow correspondent Joshua Yaffa (*Journalism* '07/SIPA '08) came to the Institute to discuss his new book with Columbia Journalism's Keith Gessen, the conversation started with the

West's misconceptions about Russia. The Harriman Institute—the oldest U.S. institution dedicated to the study of the former Soviet Union—has long been a bastion where regional specialists discuss the nuances missing from Western narratives.

It was January 2020, and Yaffa's first book, *Between Two Fires: Truth, Ambition, and Compromise in Putin's Russia*, had just been released. As he discussed the book's origins, Yaffa summarized the typical Western refrain: "As the story goes, Putin leads over a population of

BETWEEN TWO FIRES



TRUTH, AMBITION, and



COMPROMISE IN PUTIN'S RUSSIA



JOSHUA YAFFA



one hundred and forty-five million people, trapping them in a cage welded shut by propaganda and repression.”

But, while this is certainly true for some parts of the population, Yaffa said it was far from the whole story. Many ordinary Russians that he encountered “showed no sign of being somehow held against their wills.” Instead, they felt apathy toward the state. “They treated it as a given. Neither good nor bad, but simply there, like an element in the Earth’s atmosphere around which they constructed their lives,” he said.

Yaffa has been living and reporting in Russia since 2012, and he’s covered topics ranging from the disappearance of a Russian soldier in Ukraine (*New York Times Magazine*), to the Siberian train that provides medical care for remote Siberian towns (*National*

Geographic) and the clandestine internal struggle between Russia’s Federal Security Service and its Interior Ministry (*New Yorker*). But what he found most interesting in his reporting was a segment of the Russian population “who believed the best, if not the only, way to realize their vision was in concord with the state,” he said. As Yaffa traveled around the country for his reporting, he met all sorts of people who lived this way. “Fiercely proud and brilliant men and women—activists, economists, journalists, business owners,” he said, who cooperated with the state in order to maximize the chances of living the life they wanted to live. “I came to understand that in Russia, the two forces, state and citizen, speak in dialogue, a conversational timbre often missed by the foreign ear in Moscow.”

“Between two fires” is a Russian expression describing a state of entrapment between two dangers, and the necessity to compromise in order to make the threat less severe. Yaffa chose to use the phrase as part of his book title because he was fascinated by the moral quandaries confronting people in Putin’s Russia. Many opposed the regime, but, in order to direct films, write books, or practice their activism, they had to participate in keeping that regime in place. “It was hard to believe they were wrong,” said Yaffa. “Nor was I confident I would choose any differently.”

Yaffa’s interest in Russia predates his desire to become a journalist. As a child growing up in San Diego, he was always interested in foreign affairs. He started reading the



international section of the newspaper as an elementary school student and envisioned himself becoming a diplomat or foreign policy professional. In 2000, he enrolled at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service as an undergraduate. When faced with a language requirement, he chose Russian. It was an unpopular selection—Russia seemed geopolitically inconsequential at the time—but Yaffa felt drawn to it, possibly due to “some kind of childhood curiosity” about the Cold War, he told me over the phone from Moscow in July.

After college Yaffa spent two years working for a multilateral nonproliferation program that provided grants and other assistance to help former Soviet weapons scientists transition into civilian jobs. Though he took the job as a pathway into the field of foreign policy, the experience made him realize that he was more interested in the nitty-gritty details of how societies function and the richness of individual experience than in big-picture geopolitics. That's why he decided to pursue journalism. “It suited my personality,” he said. “I saw it as a more lively and freeing way to explore the world.”

When he returned to the U.S. in 2006, Yaffa applied to a dual-degree program at Columbia's Journalism School and School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA). During his SIPA year he took the Harriman Institute's core course, “Legacies of Empire and the Soviet Union,” taught by the late Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy and Alexander Motyl. Up to that point he had only experienced more specialized training in diplomacy and international relations. “Legacies felt like the American liberal arts education I never got,”

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Opposite page: The Moscow metro during the COVID-19 pandemic on March 25, 2020. Photo by P. Fisxo via Wikimedia Commons.

Above, left: Joshua Yaffa in Moscow in February 2020. Photo by Oksana Yushko.

Above right: Church in Russia's Tarusa district. Photo by shakko via Wikimedia Commons.

he said. “It struck me as education for its own sake—a refreshing, purely intellectual pursuit.”

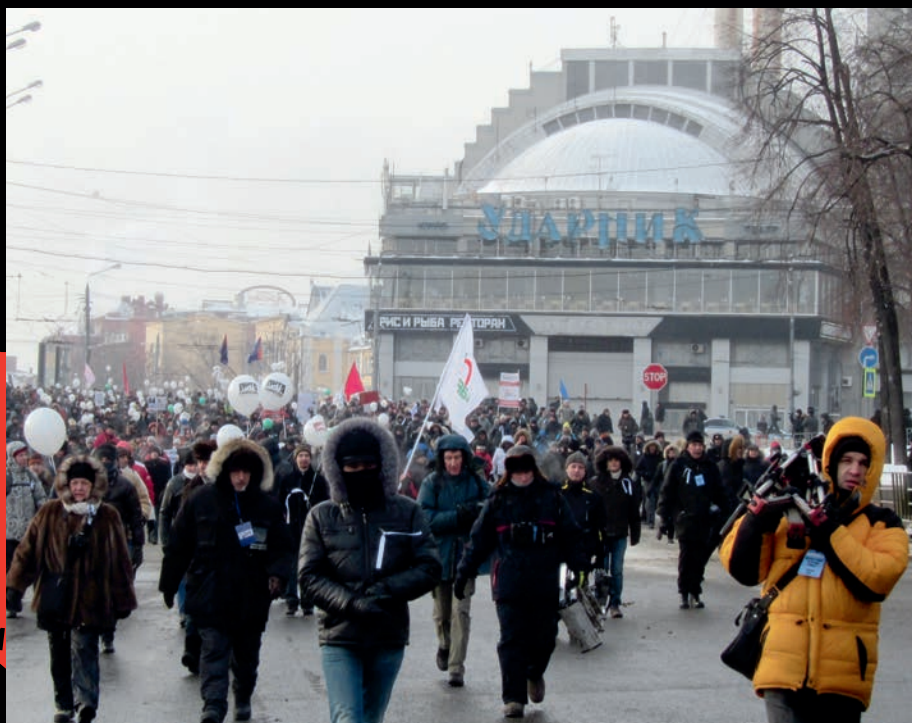
When he graduated in 2008, Yaffa took a job as an editor at *Foreign Affairs*. He wouldn’t return to reporting for another four years, when he quit his job and went to Moscow on a whim. At the time, he was living in Brooklyn and watching the Bolotnaya Square protests in Moscow unfold from afar. The series of antigovernment demonstrations was the biggest event to happen in Russia since he had started studying it, and he felt that if he didn’t go, he might lose the opportunity of a lifetime. He booked a flight to Moscow with no plan, no employment, and the idea that he would return to New York six weeks later. But he never did return—the *Economist* hired him to be its Moscow correspondent for a year, and his career took off from there, eventually landing him at the *New Yorker* in 2016. The impulsive trip to Moscow “was the greatest, craziest decision I ever made,” he said.

The year 2020 brought big changes for Yaffa. In the space of a few days in January his book was published and he got married. His wife, Julia, grew up in Moscow and works in education policy. The Harriman talk was among the first in a book tour meant to culminate in May with events at the Sydney Writer’s Festival and in the UK. But the tour ended prematurely. In early March, as Yaffa and his wife set out for a weekend getaway in Tarusa, a small town about two hours south of Moscow, the realities of COVID-19 crept into their consciousness. The following week, the world was an entirely different place.

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Below, left: Protesters walking toward Bolotnaya Square.

Below, right: Artemy Troitsky singing at Bolotnaya Square rally. Photos from February 4, 2012, by Bogomolov P.M. via Wikimedia Commons.



Yaffa and Julia converted their small two-bedroom apartment in Moscow's storied "House on the Embankment" into a shared home office and remained on strict lockdown, leaving the house a few times a week for groceries. He reported remotely, covering the potential reasons behind Russia's low reported COVID-19 numbers; what the coronavirus crisis has exposed about the power structure of Putin's regime; and, as Black Lives Matter protests unfolded in the U.S. and monuments toppled, he wrote about what Americans could learn from the toppling and relocation of Dzerzhinsky's statue in Moscow. His most recent article, in the September 14, 2020, issue of the *New Yorker*, investigates the extent to which Russian disinformation campaigns actually affect U.S. politics. Yaffa found it disorienting to conduct remote interviews. "It was a strange journalistic experience to report on huge stakes but not being able to feel or observe those stakes myself," he said.

By the time we spoke in July, Moscow had reopened. Yaffa told me he found the pace of reopening alarming. He had not yet ridden the metro and was limiting his social interactions to outdoor spaces. It was early evening, and Yaffa was about to take a bike ride through Gorky park and grab dinner with friends at an outdoor café.

As we moved to get off the phone, I asked how his reporting had evolved since his arrival in Moscow. "I came to understand that Russia is a place where the real story often happens in the gray area," he said. "Where things are complicated, fraught, and it's not always clear what's right and what's wrong." ■

i. You can read "Russia's House of Shadows," his story about the building, in the October 16, 2017 issue of the *New Yorker*.

Below, left: Moscow's House on the Embankment. Photo by Gennady Grachev via Wikimedia Commons.

Below, right: Pedestrians outside the Moscow metro during the COVID-19 pandemic on March 25, 2020. Photo by P. Fisxo via Wikimedia Commons.

