

Couchsurfing the Post-Soviet Landscape: Russia Through the Eyes of Stephan Orth

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Abstract

This paper explores Stephan Orth's *Behind Putin's Curtain: Friendships and Misadventures Inside Russia* (2019) as an example of contemporary travel writing. Using the method of couch surfing, Orth gains intimate access to Russian domestic life, moving beyond official narratives and media stereotypes. His episodic structure reflects Russia's vast diversity, while his style—marked by humour, dialogue, and self-reflection—creates a "light ethnography" of everyday experiences. Kitchens, trains, and parks emerge as cultural spaces where political ideologies are lived and contested. The study argues that Orth's work functions as a counter-narrative, reaffirming travel writing's relevance as a tool of cultural inquiry.

Keywords: Travel Writing; Couchsurfing; Post-Soviet Russia; Everyday Life; Counter-Narrative; Cultural Inquiry

Introduction

Stephan Orth, born in 1979, is a German journalist and one of the most recognized travel writers of his generation. His reputation rests on his ability to present immersive travel narratives that mix sharp observation, subtle humour, and cultural critique. Orth rose to prominence with *Couchsurfing in Iran: Softly Paving the Way for the Ayatollahs' Downfall* (2015), a book that provided rare insights into everyday life in the Islamic Republic. In contrast to Western media portrayals, Orth's travelogue focused on personal encounters, humour, and the ordinary lives of Iranians—elements often missing from political analyses.

Encouraged by its success, Orth extended his unique method to other politically complex regions. His follow-up work, *Couchsurfing in Russia: Friendships and Conflicts in the Shadow of the Kremlin* (2017), is particularly significant because it examines Russian society at a time of heightened nationalism and political assertiveness under President Vladimir Putin. He later turned his lens toward China (*Couchsurfing in China*, 2018) and North Korea (*Couchsurfing in North Korea*, 2022), both of which are countries frequently reduced to clichés in global media.

What connects these works is Orth's insistence on traveling by **couch surfing**—a method that allows him to stay with locals instead of hotels. This unconventional approach not only reduces distance between traveler and host but also provides access to private, domestic spaces. Kitchens, living rooms, and informal conversations become sites of cultural exchange, enabling Orth to represent societies in ways that feel authentic, intimate, and grounded in lived experience.

Orth's Writing Style

One of the distinguishing features of Orth's work is his distinctive style, which lies somewhere between journalism, travelogue, and cultural anthropology. He avoids the traditional authoritative voice of the expert traveller. Instead, he positions himself as an outsider who is curious, fallible, and willing to laugh at his own misunderstandings. This self-deprecating humour, combined with sharp observation, draws readers into unfamiliar cultural contexts without alienating them.

Rather than providing polished generalizations about a country, Orth tells stories. These stories are built on dialogues with hosts, encounters with strangers, or small details of everyday life. Through this, he creates what might be called a "light ethnography"—a form of cultural writing that lacks the formal rigor of anthropological fieldwork but still delivers meaningful insights. His method

democratizes cultural knowledge: readers learn about a society not through statistics or political speeches but through how ordinary people cook, joke, argue, or celebrate.

For example, in *Couchsurfing in Russia*, Orth does not simply describe nationalism as an abstract idea. Instead, he presents it as a lived reality—surfacing in conversations with hosts, in jokes told over dinner, or in the unspoken silences around sensitive political topics. His ability to weave humour with critique ensures that even sensitive issues—such as censorship, surveillance, or Crimea—are narrated in ways that feel human rather than polemical.

Structure and Method: A Fragmented Ethnography

Orth's book *Behind Putin's Curtain* (the English edition of *Couchsurfing in Russia*, published in 2019) deliberately avoids the neat, linear structure of traditional travel writing. Instead of a single continuous journey, the text is arranged episodically. Each chapter introduces a different part of Russia, ranging from major cities like Yekaterinburg to distant regions such as the Altai Mountains and the Sakha Republic in Siberia.

This fragmented structure mirrors the diversity of Russia itself. The Russian Federation covers eleven time zones and contains over 190 ethnic groups. Any attempt to present it as a singular entity would be misleading. Orth's episodic approach highlights precisely this point: Russia is not one culture, but a mosaic of many.

Couchsurfing as a method reinforces this mosaic-like quality. By staying with different hosts across various regions, Orth gains access to homes, kitchens, and private conversations that are otherwise closed to outsiders. More importantly, his method makes him a participant rather than a detached observer. As a guest, his presence shapes the interaction—whether through humour, cultural misunderstandings, or the intimacy of shared meals. In this way, Orth's travelogue captures not only how Russians live but also how they perceive and interact with a foreign guest.

The Aesthetics of the Everyday

Orth's style balances the humorous and the serious, the anecdotal and the analytical. By focusing on small, everyday experiences, he manages to address big questions without lecturing. For example, a story about unconventional driving habits may seem humorous, but it also reveals broader themes about infrastructure, regulation, and cultural adaptation. Similarly, a casual conversation about vodka consumption or hangover cures often segues into reflections on health, history, and identity. This method highlights the central idea that the “everyday” is never neutral. In Russia, as Orth demonstrates, kitchens, chess parks, and train compartments are not just physical spaces but also cultural and political ones. In these everyday environments, state ideologies are reinforced, debated, or quietly resisted. A late-night kitchen conversation might reveal anxieties about government surveillance; a chess match in a public park might reflect generational attitudes toward Soviet nostalgia.

Orth's writing therefore captures the tension between state power and individual agency. By weaving anecdotes with reflective commentary, he shows how ordinary life becomes a stage where political ideologies are both reproduced and contested.

Travel Writing as Counter-Narrative

In the wider field of travel writing, Orth's work represents a departure from older traditions. Historically, travel narratives—especially those produced by European writers—often reinforced colonial hierarchies, portraying foreign lands as exotic, dangerous, or inferior. Orth consciously avoids this framework. His narratives are dialogic rather than monologic: they emphasize conversations, multiple perspectives, and contradictions instead of imposing a single authoritative voice.

Behind Putin's Curtain functions as a counter-narrative to both Western media and Russian state propaganda. While mainstream coverage often reduces Russia to a geopolitical actor—a land of Putin, oligarchs, and oil—Orth shows it as a collection of people with diverse stories, aspirations, and struggles. Likewise, his narrative resists the simplifications of nationalist discourse within Russia itself. He reminds readers that behind official slogans lies a complex, multifaceted society.

By blurring the lines between journalism, memoir, and ethnography, Orth creates a hybrid form of travel writing that privileges lived experience. For scholars of cultural studies, this approach is significant because it demonstrates how travel writing can still serve as a tool of inquiry, not merely as entertainment.

Conclusion

Behind Putin's Curtain is more than a record of one traveller's adventures. It is a methodological experiment in how to represent a nation often misunderstood both abroad and at home. Its episodic format reflects Russia's diversity; its dialogic style foregrounds multiple perspectives; and its attention to everyday spaces reveals the intersections of the political and the personal.

For students and scholars, Orth's text offers at least three key lessons. First, it demonstrates that informal, participatory approaches such as couch surfing can yield cultural insights that formal research might overlook. Second, it highlights the importance of humour and humility in cross-cultural encounters—reminding us that mistakes and misunderstandings are not obstacles but opportunities for deeper understanding. Finally, it underscores the continuing relevance of travel writing as a mode of cultural inquiry. Far from being a mere escape or entertainment, it can serve as a serious means of engaging with questions of identity, nationalism, and globalization.

Ultimately, Orth's journey across Russia presents the country not as a monolithic entity but as a federation of fragments—contradictory, diverse, and full of quiet complexities. From industrial towns to Buddhist enclaves, from the contested territory of Crimea to the sacred waters of Baikal, Orth invites readers to see Russia through the intimate lens of its people. His work stands as a testament to the power of travel writing to challenge stereotypes, bridge cultural divides, and humanize political realities.

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