Journey into Russia

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`September 19-26, 2015`

At the height of the Cold War, van der Post decides to travel to the Soviet Union, to see it for himself, to meet people, talk to them, and make an assessment of the lay of the land. He is not a Communist, he admits that he cannot understand Communism from either a social nor economical perspective, only, as becomes clear to him during his journey, as a warped psychological state. Now it is easy to view anti-Communism as a reactionary stand, as an opposition to social equality and a sentimental regard for outdated privilege, and if you are a devoted Communist and Marxist (was Marx ever a Marxist?) as a failure to appreciate the inevitable forces of history trying to stem the tide. After the Bolsehvik revolution of 1917 Russia became a totalitarian state its people isolated from the West, and after the Second World War, this became even more pronounced. Thus one should see the liberal opposition to Communism as a reaction to a totalitarian state depriving their citizens of basic human rights and freedoms. Communism was to be feared, not because of its vision but its practice. At the same time the people, ostensibly seen as victims, also became their own oppressors, and the idea of a strange people on the other side of the Moon arose, a Homo Sovieticus, formed by the system, even brain-washed by it to become its loyal and unquestioning representatives. This is the attitude of the author, both appalled by the system, yet curious about its citizens, eager to shed prejudices and come with an open mind. One may, looking for historical parallels, consider the Ottoman empire, which for centuries provided an 'other' to the Christian West, a source both of fear and fascination (an attitude dismissed as 'orientalism' by latter commentators). A return to that former enemy followed from the collapse of the Soviet Union but the latter as the reborn Russia under Putin, may replace it once again, the fears and obsessions of politics, like all matters of fashion, follow a cyclical trajectory. But this is fifty years later, and we are now talking about the early 60's, with a prevailing attitude and climate, that I remember well from those years. No actual dates are mentioned, but the year of publication in 1964 is a bit misleading, there is no mention of the Cuban Missile crisis (the hot week of the Cold War) but of the World Championship of Soccer in the summer of 1962. The extension of the travel must have lasted for many months, maybe even half a year, with a marked change of season reflected in the reports. Thus this is old-fashioned travel taking the time it takes.

We are first treated to his arrival in Moscow by a Soviet Airliner. This being his first trip to the Soviet Union he is naturally curious about everything, looking for clues already in the aircraft, its design, furnishing and the attitudes and performances of the cabin crew. In Moscow he does not want to stay, a capital should be at the end of each journey, he argues, as a point from which to take stock, but of course this is impractical, he needs to arrange his travels. Predictably this involves a lot of red tape with the appropriate Intourist authorities. The ladies with whom he deals are invariable kind and courteous, and try to help him out, but are hamstrung by official rules and regulations. This does

not prevent them from showing some frustration as to his choice of destinations. Many of those are not denied to him because he is a foreigner and potential spy, but because the agency is unable to provide him with appropriate accommodations. As a foreigner he is after all a honored guest, often treated with a deference that embarrasses him. That ordinary Russians are seen to be traveling to destinations denied him, is initially a source of envy, but eventually he will realize that travel for a Soviet Citizen may after all be as restricted as his own, and besides they will not enjoy the special status that he is accorded.

Most of his travels are undertaken by air, partly I suspect because this is the modern way of traveling, but mostly I infer, because this is the easiest way of keeping eyes on him, because even if he is not always aware of it, he is of course being shadowed, making spontaneous contacts with ordinary people quite difficult. Many a time he is embarrassed by indadvertedly putting people into delicate situations by unseemly invitations, and some of his contacts renegade on previous made appointments never more to be seen. It was a fact of Soviet life that contacts with foreigners was frowned upon and those who engaged in them without the blessings of the authorities could find themselves in serious trouble. The author admits to naivety not appreciating initially those inevitable aspects of Soviet life.

Russia is a land of no history only of geography, and the vast extension of the landmass which is the Soviet Union is bound to impress, not to say intimidate the visitor. He is conveniently treated to such a geography lesson by a fellow passenger on his first leg to Tashkent, when he is informed about the time-difference between the western part and the far eastern part, an the huge difference in climate between the arctic north to the hot sweltering deserts in the south, along with a wealth of particular details to jog his imagination.

The first leg of the journey admits the most detailed commentary. We are treated to the Oriental cultures and lands of Central Asia, the homes of Turkish Nomads, who spread to Turkey as Ottomans into the West and as Moguls into the south, and as the base of a Chinese dynasty into the far East[1]. The author is impressed with the commitment of the Soviet authorities to preserve the historical heritage, once they identify it as such. But even more impressive is the spirit of subduing nature, of bending it to the needs of man, visions of changing the flow of great rivers, and to reforest and reclaim deserts, The Russians are engaged in a marathon project he reflects, not content with short distance success. In the same vein he is also impressed by the Soviet commitment to industrialization, and at that time, I recall, Soviet achievement was considered with awe by westerners, and it was assumed that it was only a matter of time before they would overtake the West, showing that a totalitarian and collective approach in its ruthlessness would prove more effective. The notion of a poor and ineffective Soviet giant with feet of clay would only appear in the 70's during the decadence administered by Brezhnev, in the early 60's the towering figure was still Khrushchev, who had recently broken with Stalinism[2], brought about a whiff of a liberal spring, not entirely obvious to western observers due to his occasionally belligerent

[1] The Manchurian connection

[2] The author is struck by the ubiquity of statues of Lenin, but none are to be found of Stalin. In fact the museum at Stalin's birthplace in Georgia is closed, ostensibly for repair, causing some consternation among his Georgian compatriots.

rhetoric, imbuing an optimism of outlook.

Of course the inhabitants of the Central Asian Republics are not really representative of the Soviet Union, although of course all the officials mouth the party line. Those are conquered people, subdued by Czarist expansion, seeking natural borders to the south for its growing empire, yet due to Stalin, he himself a native of a conquered region - Georgia, attaining at least a formal status of equality with the Russians, after all Russia existed no more than yet another one of the many independent republics, forming a voluntary union, namely the Soviet Union. The official ambition of the Soviet authorities of preserving regional cultures and languages, must appear to the casual visitor, and the author does not know any Russian, and is hence at the mercy of his guides and interpreters, as laudable. Of course they are, and no doubt seen as sincere by those appointed to implement them, but of course never allowed to seriously change the basic set-up.

Early on van der Post is bothered by the lack of symbols of religion. Religion is officially stamped out in the Soviet Union, a professed atheistic state having once and for all dispatched old superstition to the proverbial dust-bin of history. Without religion of some sort, man can never really live, he points out, dismayed by the crude anti-religionism. But there are of course churches and in the southern Muslim lands mosques, and the practice is tolerated as a final phase doomed to extinction, yet guides will not show him them, unless they are deigned to be of historical interest. One young guide explains that the music of Bach is so much nicer in a church, than music performed in an opera, while emphasizing that the sentiment is purely aesthetic and unsullied by any religious undertones. But of course in his first encounter by the mummified body of Lenin next to the Kremlin, he cannot but observe that there is of course religion in the Soviet Union, but a very primitive kind, more akin with that of the ancient Egyptians than with modern Christianity. He is a bit disturbed by all those statues of Lenin, and does not take kindly to the remark by a Russian that they should be compared to those of Christ. There is no way the varied and artistically expressed representation of the latter can be compared to the mechanical and stereotyped profusion of the former, he at least thinks to himself, if not giving vent to it publicly.

His initial travels take him westward from Tashkent, to the shores of the Caspian Sea, whose surface level is sinking due to over-exploitation with potentially disastrous ecological consequences in particular as to its fisheries, but maybe optimistically to be rectified by some grand measures of actually changing geography. He is taken to the mountains of Georgia, forced to drink a lot at a party, any refusal would not only be frowned upon but seen as a personal offense. He is brought to Odessa, then travels along the Black Sea, in order to cross into the Black Earth of the Ukraine, via Rostov, Kharkov and Kiev, before being brought back to Moscow. His impressions of the Ukraine are of course retroactively interesting. He learns about the Ukrainian dialect frowned upon by the authorities and refused to be seen as a fully fledged language. He notes that Ukrainians enjoy many more contacts with the West than do ordinary Russians, that they have relatives residing in the States or Canada, some of whom actually are allowed to return visits to their roots. As a consequence the Ukrainians are better informed about Western news than do the Russians who suffer from great misconceptions nourished by the authorities, which make them more

independent[3]. Yet of course the idea that the West is locked in an unrelenting hostility against the Soviet Union bent upon its destruction by nuclear forces has taken deep roots[4]. In particular much of the ire against the West is directed to the States, resulting in an anti-Americanism, the more bitter and virulent, for being fueled by a large measure of admiration and concomitant envy. The Soviet Union is incessantly measuring itself by the standards set by the Americans, obsessed with surpassing them.

More and more the author comes to see the Russians as primitive, seeing more and more affinities with the downtrodden races of his Native Africa. The same fatalistic and stolid acceptance of their fate and of their suffering from rigid bureaucracy. The same inability to organize and to rebel when being trampled upon. The Polish journalist Kapucinsky characterized the Soviet Union as an empire that colonized itself, an observation not unfanciful in view of the official designation of colonial populations, if referred to as national, making up the republics. Yet, the criticism of bureaucracy is not only tolerated in the Soviet Union, but actually encouraged, and the author was exposed to it during clownish skits performed at State Circuses. Thus by separating the State from its implementation, potentially dangerous criticism can be appropriately diverted into unthreatening channels.

But it is important to realize, as the author points out, that by him primitiveness is not necessarily to be seen as disparagement, but actually to be approved of as a state close to nature. Characteristic for primitiveness is the collective spirit, a spirit, as Kapucinsky among others have thought of imbuing the African spirit. The spirit that man does not primarily live for himself but for a larger community. In traditional Russian society represented by the Mir, the social cohesiveness imposed on villages. Thus, van der Post concludes, lies the attraction of Africa to the Soviet Union, the African primitive people see in them something they can relate to, and which is absent in the West [5].

This spirit of collectivism both wins the admiration by the author as well as his awe, not to say fear. In particular his presence at a May Day celebration in Kharkov, terrifies him. The unrelenting color of red, oppresses him, and the discipline of the crowds makes him feel strangely vulnerable as the only foreigner. He remarks that there are few individual graves to be found of victims of the war, they are all pulled together in large impersonal collectivist one, as if such abstract symbol could replace the poignancy of the individual. He is in the context amused by the totally unironic remark of a female guide, that the Eternal flame is not working today, when showing him yet another collective memorial. And impressed as he is by the relentless spirit of industrialization he cannot but regret its single-mindedness and deplore the marginalization of agriculture, which in his more mystical and holistic view cannot be approached in such a technical and industrial manner. In fact the

[3] The fact that the Ukrainians initially welcomed the German invaders cannot be lost on the authorities he remarks.

[4] A similar conception seems to be taking root in the public psyche after Putin's re-establishment as president heralding degenerating relations with the West

[5] The truth of this has not really been born out by the course of post-colonial history, instead of the Russians it is the Chinese who reap the fruits, not only being seen untainted by a colonial past, but also as more businesslike, not mixing the latter with human rights and moral considerations, embarrassing to corrupt regimes.

revolution rejected the peasant and embraced the proletarian idealizing him, and this is bound to back-fire in the end. He gives the Chinese revolution a much better prognosis, as it is indeed, at least as he understands it, based on the peasant. In particular he is aghast at the horrors of the forceful collectivization, which Stalin admitted to Churchill caused him more headaches than the German invasion, especially in the Ukraine. And he cannot forgive Solochov's dishonesty when he treated the subject in a novel.

Not surprisingly van der Post finds the Russians kind and hospitable, what he cannot endure are foreign Communists visiting the country, their blindness, lack of curiosity to challenge their preformed opinions. The Russians are of course warped by this blind technological spirit, he is struck by the lack of play and frivolous phantasy, something they appear to hunger for, and are eagerly provoked by the tidbits provided by him. Once from the train he saw a Cossack in the Siberian woods, all alone with a horse, going about his own business. It was really the first time he saw somebody in the Soviet Union not engaged in a collective enterprise, and it made a deep impression on him.

Following his first leg, mostly by air, he then embarks of the classical Transsiberian journey by train. But he is not allowed to go all the way to Vladivostok but his journey will have to stop at Irkutsk. There are a variety of explanations. Anyway he gets to see the fabled Lake Baikal and the huge hydroelectric plant along the Angara river, which flows into the greatest Siberian rivers of them all - the Yenesei (surpassing both Ob and Lena in its flow), uselessly emptying its water in the ice-covered wastes of the Arctic. On the way traveling in a Chinese car the monotonous vastness of Siberia is impressed on him. He returns to Moscow, only to take a flight to the Far East of the city Khabarovsk, whose proximity to China surprises him, as well as driving home the fact that the Siberians of the far East think of themselves as Westerners compared to the Chinese. A realization that makes him conclude that deep down the Russians are Europeans after all. The Chinese have impressed him a lot, referring to the Chinese in military uniforms that accompanied the train on its journey east (no doubt they were allowed to travel beyond Irkutsk). Far in the East he is in a strange country with a peculiar mix of faunas and floras. Here among the snow covered forests you may encounter the huge Siberian tiger, admirably depicted by Vladimir Arsenyev[6].

On the final leg he visits three cities. Riga, which impresses Russians with its relative prosperity, and where you can find good not normally available in Moscow. Leningrad, where he is aghast at the waste and prodigality of the Tsars, and fascinated by the European city[7]. And finally Moscow, where he seems to linger for two weeks, but reports only on the Kremlin.

The book ends, abolishing the travel log for a lengthy philosophical summary, the gist of which, I have already presented above.

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[6] Whose book Ursual Dezula in an old Swedish translation was reviewed a few years ago in my volumes

[7] During my visit to the Soviet Union in 1968 I was struck by how Western and European Leningrad appeared compared to Moscow, which I felt was thrown into the Russian steppes, more primitive and Asian (in the sense of the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin) than the younger Leningrad.