

Retour de l'U.S.S.R.

suivi de Retouches

A.Gide

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Gide was an ardent admirer of Communism and saw the Soviet Union as heralding a new historical era. He was invited to visit, I guess in connection with the funeral of Gorky, which took place on June 18 1936 at the Red Square. This is not explicitly acknowledged, but he gave a speech on the occasion. With him he brought a couple of younger friends, painters and writers, arguing that with more eyes and ears more would be seen and heard¹. Some of them knew Russian as well. Tragically one in the party - Eugène Dabit - fell sick during the visit and died, and the book that ensued is dedicated to him.

They were treated royally, traveled in a special luxury wagon in a train, and the best chauffeured cars the country could offer, were at their disposal where trains could not convey them. They were well-treated, not to say pampered, and were treated to sumptuous buffets and parties wherever they went. Starting out at Moscow they traveled south to Sevastopol and even to Tiflis in the Caucasus. They were gone for a couple of months.

Initially Gide was delighted. He was struck by how happy people looked, and he remarks that pictures taken of him during the visit shows him laughing and in uncharacteristically good mood, unlike the case back in France. He reports in glowing terms on the Park of Culture he visits in Moscow and compares with a French Luna-Park, although of course the Russian version is superior. He writes *On respire partout une sorte de ferveur joyeuse* and gives a list of all its attractions, especially the great variety of games of skill (*jeux d'adresses*) the Russians know of and practice. The Gorky funeral takes place only a few days after his arrival, and after having performed his duty, he and his companions are free to travel around, free to follow the regimented program the hosts have prepared for them. In particular he refers to the encounter with the young Komsomols (the young Communists) on vacation traveling with them on the train towards Caucasus. Of course they are initially isolated in their splendid luxury car, but somehow they manage to invite them inside and be treated to some popular dances and songs, the most delightful of the memories he and his entourage would bring home. Gide notes to his satisfaction that he is not unknown, many have read his 'Travels to Congo'.

However, soon there will be disillusionment. First he becomes struck with the lack of individuality. *Chacun ressemble à tout*. He writes about *un société sans classes, dont chaque membre paraît avoir les mêmes besoins*. and in fact *pour parler des gens, user d'un partitif et dire non point: des hommes, mais: de l'homme*. And he is confronted with one inescapable aspect of Soviet society namely

¹ Jef Last (1898-1972) Dutch writer, Louis Guilloux (1899-1980) writer, Jacques Schiffner (1892-1950) literary editor (Pleiades), Pierre Herbart (1903-1974) writer, Eugène Dabit (1898-1936) painter and writer

Que font ces gens, devant ce magasin? Ils font la queue; une queue qui s'étend jusqu'à la rue prochaine. Ils sont là de deux à trois cents, très calmes, patients, qui attendent. Il est encore tôt; le magasin n'a pas ouvert ses portes. Trois quart d'heure plus tard, je repasse: le même foule est encore là. Je m'étonne: que sert d'arriver à l'avance? Qu'y gagne-t-on?

He now becomes privy to the great lack of consumer goods in the Soviet Union. That only people first in line will be getting what everyone is queuing for. And what is that in this case? Apparently cushions. You buy out of dire necessity not out of pleasure. In the affluence of the United States, shopping will soon evolve into a past-time for everyone, but not in the Soviet Union, where it will take so much time that there is no time for past-time. If you find something here you take it or leave it, there is no option of a choice. Merchandise is of shoddy quality, souvenirs to bring home are just dreadful. Much as he professes to hate capitalism, he has to concede a point: competition improves quality, but the state has no rival, hence no motivation, not to speak of pressing need, to improve things. He is then struck by the indolence of the people. They do not work hard, in fact they seem not to work at all. Productivity is low as is yield in agriculture. Stakhanovism would be redundant in a society where people work²

With lack of individuality there is conformism. *... chaque fois que l'on converse avec un Russe, c'est comme si l'on conversait avec tous..* And who tells people how to think? One obvious source is of course *Pravda* where truth is to be found. In order to maintain this, the Russians must be kept isolated, no information from the outside is allowed to enter across borders, in order to keep up the illusion that Russians are lucky, and that they have all reasons to be content with their miserable lot, because the situation outside Russia is much worse. As Gide puts it: *Leur bonheur est fait d'espérance, de confiance et d'ignorance..* This self-satisfaction based on ignorance annoys him deeply. In particular their ignorance of the outside world, especially of France. People express surprise that Paris has a metro, that there are schools in France. As to foreign languages there are attempts to teach English and German, but French? Forget about it, which offends him. Besides they profess that there is little reason for Russians to learn foreign languages, what can other countries teach them? Gide refers to it as a *complexe de supériorité*. This accords very well with the image I had of Russia as a child. A society convinced of their superiority. Whatever good discovered or invented in the world, you could be sure that the Russians would claim one of their own as having true priority. The kind of boasting one attributed to an inferiority complex. Only later would one learn of Stalinist despotism and the GULAG, the latter concerned Russians as victims, and that took a certain maturity to appreciate, the primary feeling was of Russians as enemies, and thus subhuman. The Russians of course, in Gide's reporting, do not see the outside world necessarily as hostile,

² Stakhanov (1906-1977) was a miner, more specifically a jackhammer operator, who in 1935 (thus just a year before Gide's visit) managed to set a record of mining 102 tonnes of coals in 5 hours and 45 minutes, in fact 14 times his quota. That was followed by an even more spectacular record, and he became a model for other workers, starting a movement of competition to the glory of Socialism, where workers tried to overdo their quotas. This led to higher wages and rewards and privileges. And also to higher productivity. His initial feats have been called in questions, but that matters little in retrospect.

bur rater as befuddled, having not yet had their revolution, and thus still residing in the dark.

Still Gide is impressed with certain aspects of Soviet society, how well they take care of their children (*Tous les enfants respirent la santé, le bonheur.*), and how much they are concerned with the health of their population, all of it being confirmed by the model institutions which he is shown. But even that will have to be reassessed in the presence of new encounters. What really surprises him is the widespread poverty, something he was not at all prepared for.

Il n'y a plus de classes en U.R.S.S., c'est entendu. Mais il y a des pauvres. Il y a en trop; beaucoup trop. J'espérais pourtant bien ne plus en voir, ou même plus exactement: c'est pour ne plus en voir que j'étais venu en U.R.S.S.

This poverty, whose existence he only gradually becomes aware of, makes him ashamed of the privileged status he enjoys as a visitor. The banquets to which they are almost daily treated are at such a luxurious level to be seen as obscene in view of the general poverty. One such meal he and his companions are regularly treated to, would probably feed a family for a year. He warns about the *d'esprit petit-bourgeois* which threatens to take over and betray the initial revolution. The differences in incomes are staggering, where the poor are not only poor in relative terms, but in fact reduced to salaries on which they cannot really survive. Those who have comfortable salaries live well and of course are those typical people whom he may meet, those are the ones who hold those offensive views of superiority, the poor, on the other hand, are hidden from view, stuck in slums, and too oppressed to have any offending views at all. This new society, almost twenty years into the revolution, has its own aristocracy, but not one based on merit, but on conformism, and ultimately on money. What has happened to the beautiful visions of Marx and Engels, those who envisioned a world where the struggle for survival on a subsistence level, would be replaced by less time devoted to work and more pastime in which to improve yourself. The real problem with the Soviet Union is not the lack of proper consumer goods and an inefficient apparatus for production, nor the sense of superiority maintained by those more successful; but the betrayal of a classless society by one based on propaganda and downright duplicity and the impossibility of any protest, and criticism and he concludes:

Et je doute qu'en aucun autre pays aujourd'hui, fût-ce dans l'Allemagne de Hitler, l'esprit soit moins libre, plus courbé, plus craintif (terrorisé), plus vassalisé.

Those revelations do not struck us now as remarkable, after all they adhere to the, admittedly somewhat vulgar versions of Soviet Society which were common fare, when I grew up, and would with time be outdone by far more condemning testimonies. 1936 was the time of the Moscow trials, which upset and scandalized the European leftist intelligentsia (to those who opposed the Soviet state for being Marxist, they hardly came as a surprise, and if anything were welcomed as providing grist to their mills), and such revelations were in the air. But Gide and his fellow leftists were not the first, the Austrian journalist and novelist - Joseph Roth - made a similar analysis, already in the 1920's, during the NEP-era, before the despotism of Stalin had been consolidated³.

³ As pointed out to me by Anders Björnsson.

By the mid 1930's the cult of Stalin had been consolidated as well, so when Gide suggests to send a friendly message to Stalin on occasion of visiting his home-city, his handlers are aghast at his suggested text, finding it not laudatory enough. One cannot simply address him with a 'vous' without embellishing this simple pronoun with specific references to his greatness. Gide is aghast. Portraits of Stalin are to be seen everywhere, not just grandly at official places, but every single little abode seems to have a picture of him hung often where previously there had hung an icon.

Being a writer has high status in Russian society, higher than those of artists, something that Gide notes with satisfaction. For one thing they are well-paid and the royalties he and his companions can reap and which they are forbidden to bring out of the country cause but inconvenience, as there really is not much they can spend it on (some of them scour outlets of antiquities for possible souvenirs). But how could a real writer really survive in a society which puts a premium on conformism, and in fact tolerates nothing else? A real writer must swim against the current, only in opposition against what is taken for granted, can his or her imagination work. But of course, Gide reflects sadly, even in the greatest of works the public only pay attention to what it recognizes, which means what is trivial. He notes that one should be really grateful to the freedom of expression enjoyed in France, something one cannot take for granted but is nevertheless so much abused. There is no reason to doubt, Gide writes, that Marxism may inspire great art, but very much so when it comes to Soviet society. What does not conform to preset notions is disregarded, and beauty is dismissed as a bourgeois value. But Gide keeps an open mind and ends his book by *L'U.R.S.S. n'a pas fini de nous instruire et de nous étonner*.

In an appendix five snatches of reports, which he apparently could not weave into the text, are presented. The first concerns the campaign against religion that is going on in Russia. He disapproves of it. It is not a question of faith, he points out, it would be absurd to literally believe in the Greek Myths, but without them our humanistic culture would be seriously impoverished, and the same goes of course for the Bible, especially the evangelists. He refers to it as *on a jeté l'enfant avec l'eau du bain*, after vainly trying to find a French equivalent of the excellent metaphor provided in German. Then there is a strange visit to a young bedridden author Nikolai Ostrovsky (1904-1936) paralyzed and blind dictating his works. The scene brings tears to the eyes of Gide as he sits by his side, holding his emancipated hands. A third recalls a visit to a kolchoz, where he is given an explanation of how workers gets paid in units of daily works with a fixed conversion rate into money, and how good workers can be paid multiples of such, occasionally quite high ones, making for a great disparity in incomes. A fourth reports on the village of Bolchevo, founded on the initiative of Gorky and devoted to the rehabilitation of criminals. It is based on the philosophy that crimes should not be laid at the doors of their perpetrators, but at a society which enables them. The whole thing seems almost too good to be true, and Gide is reminded on the Oxford movement (and AA?) in which everyone makes a confession and forms a resolution: *J'étais pécheur et malheureux; je faisais a mal; mais maintenant, j'ai compris, je suis sauvé, je suis heureux*. Finally he writes about the street children, as he encounters them in Sevastopol, where they are abundant. They are known as besprizornis (беспризорны) and can be recognized by wearing so much clothing even in the heat of summer, when luckier children run around in swimming trunks. The reason

being for this strange fact is that being homeless they need to carry everything they own on their bodies all the time. Gide is touched by the tenderness one of those urchins is handled by a police officer. A case of human kindness independent of the particular society in which it happens to take place.

In the follow-up book (appearing a year later and conveniently included in this edition) Gide comments on his claims, and provides further documentation. His book was criticized and he lost friends, the most painful being the loss of Romain Rolland, which made it imperative on him to respond. He now presents statistics, showing both the lack of productivity and how much of what is produced has to be recalled. This happens at all levels, even in such trivial cases as when printing school-books with incorrect multiplication tables [!]. Much of the material can be found in publications such as *Pravda* and *Izvestia*. He repeats his criticism as to the abolishing of capitalism does not automatically lead to the liberation of the worker; and that the insufficient salaries of the majority enables the disproportionate remuneration of the well-to-do. He deplores the growth of the bureaucracy, initially created as an instrument of handling things, and now become one of domination. And once again that he did not travel to the U.R.S.S. to encounter privileges, those had had naively thought to have been abolished. He rages against intellectuals who prefer to hide the shortcomings rather than expose them for fear of discouraging those less privileged and intelligent than themselves. But for him lies makes him uncomfortable and he feels compelled by duty to denounce them. And then finally that the Soviet Union is about to betray all our hopes.

Also his 'Retouches' comes equipped with an appendix, in which he relates a few of the episodes, which could not fit into his 'Retour'. One was that he met Bukharin who whispered to him that he wanted to meet him at his hotel, but never showed up. Had he not been for his companion Herbart he would have attributed this failure to simple dismissal, but then understood that there were more ominous reasons for his absence. In fact, as it would turn out, Bukharin would two years later be yet another victim of a show trial and executed by Stalin⁴. Finally a couple of letters to Gide are attached at the end, all dealing with his revelations of his book.

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⁴ The aforementioned Rolland had in vain tried to intervene on behalf of Bukharin, but Stalin. not surprisingly had ignored him