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# JOURNEY INTO RUSSIA

LAURENS VAN DER POST

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## About the Book

Laurens van der Post takes us behind the iron curtain of Soviet officialdom in a quest to discover the real Russia - a land full of enigma and secrecy, but treasured by its people.

## About the Author

Laurens van der Post was born in South Africa in 1906, the thirteenth of fifteen children in a family of Dutch and French Hugenot origins. Most of his adult life was spent with one foot in Africa and one in England. His professions of writer and farmer were interrupted by ten years of soldiering in the British army, serving with distinction in the Western Desert, Abyssinia, Burma and the Far East. Taken prisoner by the Japanese, he was held in captivity for three years before returning to active service as a member of Lord Mountbatten's staff in Indonesia and, later, as Military Attache to the British Minister in Java.

After 1949 he undertook several official missions exploring little-known parts of Africa, and his journey in search of the Bushmen in 1957 formed the basis of his famous documentary film *The Lost World of the Kalahari*. Other television films include *All Africa Within Us* and *The Story of Carl Gustav Jung*, whom he met after the war and grew to know as a personal friend. In 1934 he wrote *In a Province*, the first book by a South African to expose the horrors of racism. Other books include *Venture to the Interior* (1952), *The Heart of the Hunter* (1961), and *A Walk with a White Bushman* (1986). *The Seed and the Sower* was made into a film under the title *Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence*, and, more recently, *A Story Like the Wind* and *A Far-Off Place* were combined and made into the film *A Far-Off Place*.

Sir Laurens van der Post was awarded the CBE in 1947 and received his knighthood in 1981. He died in 1996.

Also by Laurens van der Post

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IN A PROVINCE  
VENTURE TO THE INTERIOR  
THE FACE BESIDE THE FIRE  
A BAR OF SHADOW  
FLAMINGO FEATHER  
THE DARK EYE IN AFRICA  
THE LOST WORLD OF THE KALAHARI  
THE HEART OF THE HUNTER  
THE SEED AND THE SOWER

For  
INGARET

# Journey into Russia

Laurens van der Post

1980

THE HOGARTH PRESS

LONDON

*"It would mean an enormous waste of wealth, labour and even human life but the strength of Russia and the secret of her destiny has always consisted to a great extent in the readiness and power to ignore the cost in obtaining a desired result."*

From Waliszewski's PETER THE GREAT

*"Une révolution ne maintient sa victoire que par une technique opposée aux moyens qui la lui ont donnée. Et parfois même aux sentiments."*

MALRAUX

## PREFACE

I am not an expert on Russia and speak very little Russian. On my travels I had to rely a great deal on official guides and interpreters, though not so much as I had expected because I was amazed at the numbers of people I encountered who spoke either German, French, or, more especially, extremely good English to me. Therefore, what follows are no more than my impressions of the enormous physical scene of the Soviet Union, its history in so far as it still affects living issues and its peoples. My main justification for attempting even this much is that I have always been intensely curious about Russia; have been an ardent reader of Russian literature and history and now have accomplished what is perhaps the longest single journey through the Soviet Union undertaken since the war by someone who is not a Communist.

My chief regret is that I have been unable to be more specific about the people I met. For reasons into which I go fully in my account of the journey I believed it necessary in their own interests to camouflage their personalities and the incidents in which they were concerned. I realize that perhaps I may have been unduly fearful in my precautions but the impressions made on me by the Soviet system convinced me I had no option. I am sorry too that for the same reasons I could not be more explicit about my guides and interpreters. On the whole they served me well with good will, efficiency and sometimes great imagination. If they too are somewhat obscure in the account of my journey it is certainly not because I am ungrateful for the

service they rendered me or that the service itself was inconsiderable.

Finally I have tried not to exceed my own experience. No one can travel through the Soviet Union alone as I did without being humbled by the realization of how little he has seen and can possibly know of so vast a country. Yet there is at the same time a similarity and continuity of character in the people who dominate the Soviet Union which encourages me to believe that one's slight experience can be more representative of the whole than it would have been in many other countries of the world. However much the physical nature of the land may change from the Polish frontier to the Pacific, one has the extraordinary sensation of always arriving at the point from which one had departed. In fact the farther East I went the more Russian the scene and people seemed to become.

I regret too that I cannot acknowledge all the many people who helped me. Here I can only thank Harry Sions and Ted Patrick of the distinguished American journal *Holiday* for commissioning me to do the journey on their behalf; Sir Patrick Reilly, Britain's former Ambassador to Moscow and an old friend of mine, for his help and advice before setting out, and Bill Barker, the British Minister in Moscow, and his wife Margaret for many reasons but above all for giving me a home to go to when in need in Moscow, and I owe an enormous debt as ever to my wife Ingaret Giffard, for editing my MS.

Half Crown Cottage,  
Aldeburgh,  
Suffolk

## *Chapter One*

### DEPARTURE

I MUST BEGIN with the mood in which I took on the journey to Russia if that journey is properly to be understood. For years I had been in trouble with the image of Russia presented to us in the outside world. My own life has compelled me to travel much and the process has convinced me that one never really knows another country unless one knows it through the life of the individuals who compose it. The characters revealed to us in newspapers and books or smeared on to the crowded international canvas tend to be more and more over-simplified and over-drawn until the responses of the individual suddenly acquire the dimensions of caricature. Even more than these cartoon inaccuracies what alarmed me on my travels were the factors of impersonalization and dehumanization in the pictures countries painted for themselves of other nations, and years ago I began to cast around for correctives. I found the only effective one was holding on firmly in my imagination to such personal relationships as I had been able to form in foreign countries. I discovered that if I had but one clear portrait of an individual to which I could refer the collective abstractions that confronted me their exaggeration and inaccuracy were speedily exposed. Finally this scaling down of monstrous over-simplifications to their fallible, questing, and constituent human proportions came to appear to me as one of the most urgent tasks of our day. I could

understand possibly that a nation might be tempted to bomb a country which it regarded as filled with dire monsters. But I firmly believed the temptation could be resisted the moment it saw the potential enemy as a people like itself, struggling each day to get to its office desk, factory bench or plough. Even in the war, when all life seemed abandoned to the power of the vast inhuman collective forces of the day, the rule had proved effective for me. Thus in the horror of a Japanese prison camp I discovered that by clinging to my memory of friendships formed in Japan years before I not only preserved my own spirit from the bitternesses of the moment but even evoked in the most brutal of our gaolers something individual and human which stood us all in good stead throughout those long inarticulate years of captivity.

In peacetime in the foreign countries to which I was unable to travel I found also a substitute for direct personal relationships in their art and literature. Literature particularly provided my imagination with specific glimpses into the common, questing flesh-and-blood reality of other countries, which put the generalizations purveyed to us into a human context and perspective. The more I travelled the more I realized how much one owed the artist and the writer. There was, for example, my own experience with France. I knew French literature before I knew France and consequently no matter how anti-French the popular waves of emotion or tone of the newspapers at any given time I remained comparatively immune because, thanks to my reading, the French remained for me a people of a rich, diverse and endearingly paradoxical individuality. I was able to translate into the idiom of my own environment the statement of character personified in the immense range of literature from Villon to Daudet and as a result I possessed a feeling of kinship with the French which nothing could destroy. When I came to live in France later I was amazed at

the number of doors already opened wide in this way for me to an understanding of the French.

Now my trouble with the Russian image was precisely that I could not discover a Russian individual in it. No matter what and how much I read or how closely I scrutinized my newspapers the Russians remained a vast, uniform, impersonal, undifferentiated and forbiddingly ideological mass. Worse, the characters I met in contemporary Russian literature just would not take on any recognizable individual shape but seemed to insist on performing predetermined official roles wearing always the same fixed masks, like characters in an ancient Greek play. I felt this impediment so keenly and thought it so dangerous that I discussed it once with three Russians whom I met at a conference held in Switzerland for writers from behind the Iron Curtain. I think all of us from Western Europe were dismayed that we were never able to talk to one of these three alone. We had, of course, no sinister design on their corporate Russian self but the three Russian writers clung to one another so persistently that we were forced to conclude they did so by design. The best I could do was to tell them that, thanks to their pre-revolutionary literature, I knew the vanished Tsarist Russia far better than I knew the U.S.S.R. I had had close relationships in my imagination with individual Russian characters who invested the knowledge I had of the period with a warm, vivid and living human reality. But I had had no such help in trying to understand contemporary Russia. All the characters I met in Soviet literature seemed oddly unreal, illustrating some special ideological point. We could not understand them, I pleaded, as we ourselves wished to be understood until we knew them as individuals and could read of them as such.

The three Russians, however, protested that in their literature they were represented in their entirety and that what obsessed their deepest and most personal imaginations were indeed these rhetorical slogans, these

broad objectives and personifications of the Soviet version of dialectical materialism.

Frankly I did not believe them. Instead I clung to my belief that behind the approved masks, there was a human personality to be discovered in Russia as rich and warm as any in the world. Yet subsequently such contact as I had with Russia and the Russians in the outside world was not encouraging.

There was, for example, the period in 1961 that I spent in Berlin. There I failed utterly to perceive what might be behind the Russian mask. I remembered East Berlin and the intangible but none the less real cloak of unease that was thrown over me the moment I crossed the line which divided it from the West. Even the apartment houses in the reconstructed part of the sombre city, built to the Soviet prescription, seemed to stand rigidly and apprehensively to attention, all dressed in the same severe, graceless and aggressive architectural uniform. I remarked in particular the Russian war memorial. It was built on top of a vast grave into which some eighty thousand Russian dead had been bulldozed. Somehow it seemed enough to the Russians that their soldiers were collective in death as they had been in life. In the West huge organizations are maintained in all our armies to make certain that after death the individual can be identified, given decent burial in a separate grave and his sacrifice acknowledged with a cross bearing his name, number, date of birth, time and manner of death. But this Russian Memorial implied that these wide differences between the Soviet world and our own were matters that involved not only life but death itself. Climbing up the tiers of steps to the top of the building the depression which this realization caused in me was increased by the wreaths piled high on the balustrades. It happened on that day to be the anniversary of the battle in which the eighty thousand men had been killed and the wreaths were new and their artificial flowers bright. I looked closely at the inscriptions. They too

were all official and collective with dedications like: “The workers of the shipbuilding yards of Rostock salute the glorious Soviet dead” or “The collective farmers of Silesia pay everlasting homage, etc. etc.” I looked in vain for some wreath or posy of flowers saying no more than: “Jack remembered with love from Jill” or “Bill from his ever-loving Mum”. None the less my belief persisted that behind the opaque official front there was a man and his humanity to be discovered and honoured, and until this were done no real understanding between ourselves and the Russians would be possible. I thought, therefore, that I would make the people behind the mask the main object of my journey to Russia. Whether I was overnaïve in thinking I could do this under the circumstances existing in the Soviet Union today, the account of my journey will show.

My first step was to turn for advice to all my friends and acquaintances in London who knew the Soviet Union. The most experienced shook his head doubtfully when I told him I would need at least three months for my journey. “I doubt if they’ll give you a visa to stay in Russia for as long as that. They don’t like visitors to spend more than a few weeks in the country. Moreover they don’t like individual travellers but favour groups of tourists committed to one of their standard itineraries.” He then suggested that I should plan an itinerary for as short a stay as possible, put that up, and once in Moscow try to get an extension if necessary. “If they like you,” he concluded, “and are convinced of your good will you might get your visa extended.”

Another expert quarrelled immediately with this advice declaring emphatically, “Once you’ve agreed to a date and a travel plan with the Russians they won’t vary it by a yard or a second. Take my tip and ask for all you want now.”

So I pruned my plan like a tree in danger of being exhausted by bearing too much fruit and eventually went off with a considerable letter of recommendation to the Soviet Embassy in London.

I had never been to the Soviet Embassy before but it had always seemed to me somewhat incongruously housed in Kensington Palace Gardens, an area so expensive that Londoners know it as "Millionaires' Row". More curious still was the old-fashioned air in the reception rooms of the Embassy itself. Decor, furniture, plush, leather and lace reminded me more of a club than an advanced twentieth-century Embassy. I would not have been surprised to see an oil-painting of Mr Gladstone instead of portraits of the Soviet leaders on the panelled walls. However, in this eminently respectable atmosphere I was received over a period of weeks with an old-world courtesy by officials invariably wearing black suits of a conventional cut and speaking first-rate English. They always listened to my requests with patience but even at this early stage I received an inkling of the overwhelming centralization of the Soviet system. It soon became clear that, courteous and helpful as officials in London were, they could do little more than sympathetically refer my requests to Moscow.

This aspect of the Soviet way of life is so fundamental that it is as well to come to terms with it at the beginning. I had been determined to rid my mind of preconception in order to receive as fresh an impact of the human reality of Russia as possible. Yet here, right at the start, I found myself contrasting this portentous procedure with what happened to me when I last went to Italy. Then the whole matter had been settled for me in five minutes by a charming girl in her teens. But here, in the Soviet Embassy, I was not sure that they would take me in at all! I did not conform to the normal Soviet tourist rule. It was even suggested that since I was visiting the Soviet Union on behalf of an American magazine I should apply for facilities to the Russian Embassy in Washington! I explained several times to the Embassy that I was concerned not with Communism but with the ordinary people of Russia and their great land. But I got the impression that the purpose of my journey to which I

attached so much importance did not really make sense to the officials who interviewed me. They were too polite to say so, however, and instead let their native good-sense triumph over their official distaste of exceptions by begging me to go to their State travel organization, Intourist. They assured me there would be no difficulty over a visa once I had an approved Intourist itinerary in my possession. I went, therefore, with my original travel plan to Intourist in London. They at once authorized my own efficient travel agent to deal directly with their headquarters in Moscow. From there on I was struck by the speed and decision with which Moscow reacted. Moscow knew its own mind in these matters. Its "No" remained "no" however eloquently I reasoned against it. So I had to accept a travel plan which allowed me far less than half the time that I had asked for in my application for a visa.

The visa itself was another story. The maximum delay of ten days promised to me at the beginning stretched to twenty. Either a messenger or I myself importuned the Soviet Embassy four or five times a week. Each time we were politely asked to come back the next day and the visa would be complete. Once the mystery of the delay seemed explained when my passport was returned because there was said to be no "proper" space in it for a Soviet visa. A young diplomat explained that the only empty space was on the back of the page which bore my last visa to the United States and where the imprint of the American eagle on the United States seal had come boldly through the page. Clearly its presence in the midst of a Soviet visa could not be contemplated so I immediately obtained a new passport and handed it over for its virgin pages to be ravished by the Soviet seal-makers. I thought that now, surely, I should have it back, stamped, within ten days at most. But five more empty weeks went by. Then, just thirty-six hours before I was due to leave London Airport for Moscow, my visa arrived. It gave me not merely the eight weeks I had asked

for but threw in another nine days for good measure, and I had no trouble later in getting my visa extended in Moscow for further weeks. The experts still insist that I was inordinately lucky. All the same I think there is something else to be discerned in all this. If one accepts with as good grace as possible all the conventional tourist formula which the Soviet Union offers then I believe one has far more chance of success than is commonly supposed. Also a great deal depends on the individual and I am certain I could not have done a quarter of the little I managed to do had I not been genuine in my proposition to the Russians that I sought only to learn something of the humanity of their people.

Usually I travel in the simplest manner possible but on this occasion the complexities of arrangements made for me on the best available advice made me feel rather ridiculous. My suitcase was packed with almost every conceivable variety of clothing from the lightest tropical bush-jacket to the warmest ski-ing underwear. There was one exception. I had discarded a dinner-jacket on being advised that it was scorned as the most *bourgeois* of symbols in the Soviet Union. My financial provisions too had been as laborious. Instead of just a single book of traveller's cheques from my bank I possessed also traveller's cheques issued by the Russian State bank, credit coupons on Intourist and a tactical selection of sterling and dollar denominations. I tried also to get some roubles before leaving but so great is the Soviet fear of black market dealings in its money that these are not legally obtainable in the outside world and can only be taken in and out of the country at peril. Breaches of currency regulations in Russia are punishable by death.

Never had I bought so many different kinds of tickets for a single journey, either. I fully intended travelling by trans-Siberian railway from Moscow to Vladivostok but all my appeals for the requisite permission had been turned down by cable after cable from Moscow merely repeating: "No

Intourist facilities Vladivostok". My only hope of changing the official mind, I was assured, lay in applying for a ticket by rail and sea all the way to Tokyo. So in addition to the London-Moscow return ticket demanded by Intourist, and the vouchers covering the limited provisional itinerary, I was equipped with documents enabling me to come back to London via Japan, Sweden, Finland, India, Greece or Austria! I may be pardoned for repeatedly thinking with envy of the hero of one of my favourite travel books, *Round the World on a Wheel*. In the nineties of the last century he had decided to go round the globe on a bicycle. With no currency or visa restrictions the idea was no sooner thought of than done. One fine day this wheeled Drake in Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers just stuffed his pockets full of five-pound notes and mounted his bicycle for the nearest Channel port. By way of France he cycled without mishap across Western Europe into Russia, through Siberia and, with the help of ocean ferries, on and around the world and back home again to his first good cup of tea in months!

I had been pressed, too, into carrying almost as many medicines as I would take on a major expedition into the wilds of Africa. A friend's chauffeur who had once driven some exceptionally privileged tourists around Russia in the brief period when this was allowed, remonstrated gravely with me on the fell incidence of "tummies" in Russia, quoting Uzbek, Khazak, Tartar, Crimean, Ukrainian and other Left-wing varieties of tummy troubles and I might have been persuaded by his eloquence to add to my collection of drugs. I never had cause to regret my decision not to do so.

On top of all this I had to take with me soap and all sorts of modest commodities of which the Soviet Market was reputed to be in short supply, and which, I was assured, would be far more welcome as tips than money. In the end, the impatience induced in me by so unaccustomed a fussiness in preparation was only appeased by the conviction that no contingency could arise on the journey

for which I was not now fully prepared. Nevertheless after going through my list with great concern the wife of an old friend went to her storeroom, and as I left thrust a small parcel into my hands with the ominous words: "You'll need this." Back in my room at the hotel I found it consisted of several packets of the best *bourgeois* toilet paper.

I myself thought only one section of my preparations inadequate: I had very little reading matter on Russia with me. Anxious to get my own impressions of the Soviet Union I had thought it better to postpone reading until the end of my journey. All I had wanted to read beforehand were some first-rate histories of Russia before the Revolution. Even in primitive countries which have no written histories of their own, the life of a people never begins to make sense to me until I have uncovered the verbally transmitted story of their past legends and myths which, in my view, influence the patterns of behaviour just as a concealed magnet affects a field of iron filings scattered on the surface of a table above it. Nor was the importance of the Russian historical past diminished for me by the fact that Soviet Russia had apparently wilfully rejected it. History has its own metabolism. At its deepest level it is independent of the denials and manipulations to which nations seek, periodically, to subject it for temporary ends and I feared that without access to this submerged idiom I would be unable to interpret the meaning of the contemporary scene. So I went hopefully through the bookshops in London only to discover that Russian history, in the sense that I sought it, no longer appeared to be on offer. Histories of the Bolshevik Revolution, and the last Tsarist years, and still more histories of the post-revolutionary years filled vast shelves. But even comparatively recent historians like Pares and Maynard were out of print, as also was Richard Charque's short history of Russia which had appeared some time before like a chink of light in the black-out of the moment. So, grateful to the greed with which I have always read world history

and putting my faith in the library of the British Embassy in Moscow, I had to set off with only my Russian grammar and dictionary, the Marquis de Custine's *Voyage en Russie* written some hundred and twenty years ago, the remarkable history of Georgia by an old friend of mine W. E. D. Allen, and a set of the Geographical Society's admirable maps of the Soviet Union.

It may have been merely a sign of how difficult it is these days to be objective about other countries when they are continually debated on radio and television, or it may have been a warning that despite my good resolutions to the contrary I had already taken up an attitude to the journey well in advance of my experience but at Heathrow it appeared to me that the Soviet Jet in which I was to fly to Moscow was keeping its crew very much to itself. Nor, I realized with amazement, were there any Soviet hostesses among the dozens of different nationalities which brightened our dull, pretravel mob. We had to set off to find our aircraft by bus without any feminine guidance. The aircraft itself, too, took some finding. It was tucked away on its own at the far end of London Airport out of reach of casual contact with the English world around it. I liked the look of it even at a distance. It was cream coloured, with a little red painted on it. It had a nice clean line and a simplicity of proportion in design. I found myself giving it an immediate vote of confidence. Although it had only left Moscow that morning the aircraft was already turned about and hovering on the edge of the main runway like a bird with wings stretched and impatient for its homeward flight. But we met none of the crew until we stepped on board. At the head of the gangway three young women in neat outfits of Siberian blue received us with great formality. One wore a cap, one a silk kerchief tied peasant-wise round her head and the other had nothing at all on her minutely curled yellow hair. Yet the expression in the three pairs of eyes was the same: withdrawn and uncommitted. Their manner too

was grave, detached and impersonal without any hint of the smile with which their colleagues among Western nations inevitably welcome the traveller on board. They showed us all to our seats in a business-like manner, told me in English with hardly a trace of accent, how to fasten my safety belt, and then in what seemed to me a remarkably short space of time we were taxi-ing into take-off position on the runway. One of the young women presented me with a boiled sweet on a tray. Notices in Russian and English flashed on the screen in front of us and scarcely had I time to marvel how the Russian alphabet made these warning notices look oddly like quotations in Greek from Homer, before we left the earth easily and without a jerk. It was one of the most purposeful and streamlined departures which I had ever experienced.

So at last I set off from London Airport on a lovely morning in April. The honey light, the larkspur sky with a sail or two of cloud on the edge of the blue, the green bud bursting from the dark bark of the patient trees proclaimed with typical understatement the defeat of a long winter and the tender re-beginning which is spring in England. Would it be the same in Russia when I landed there in a few hours' time?

I sat back to examine the aircraft and companions like someone studying the programme of a new opera before the rise of the first curtain. My seat was as comfortable as—the simile came to me unbidden—a dentist's chair, and I could lean back as far as suited my purpose. There was no one in front of me and I had a clear view into the alley leading to the cockpit. The furnishings were grey and chromium, austere and oddly clinical. But the smooth effortless way in which the jet climbed into the gentle blue over England reassuringly demonstrated that the engines and aerodynamics of the plane had been the main consideration. The luggage racks, too, were woefully inadequate and the reason for this evaded me until I started

travelling on the internal air services of the Soviet Union. There the luggage racks were still smaller but adequate because their passengers carry pathetically little on their journeys. But I, in my first ignorance, thought it to be just an oversight in design.

I was still in the midst of speculation of this kind when our noonday meal arrived, unannounced by menu, wine list or inquiry of any kind. The young hostess of the silk kerchief appeared suddenly at my side with a tray and informed me with great seriousness that I could have vodka, beer, wine or Russian champagne with my food.

I asked if I could have mineral water instead?

“Of course,” she said with a touch of asperity as if somewhat insulted by the doubt implied in my request, and promptly fetched me a whole bottle.

On my tray was a lavish portion of black caviare, smoked salmon of excellent quality, sardines, shrimps, tunny fish, ham, tongue, mixed salads, a chunk of butter and several kinds of bread including the wonderful Russian black bread with the harvest tang of the corn still in it. I imagined this to be the whole of my meal. But I was wrong. Unlike the luggage racks, food in the air in Russia is more than generous. A dish of hot red Bortsch followed, a huge fried steak with onions, cabbage and a mound of roast potatoes pursued the soup and, if my stamina had been equal to the occasion, I could have had some cheese, chocolate éclairs and fruit as well. Having already eaten more than usual I bowed myself out of the race over a cup of coffee.

I began now to take notice of my fellow passengers who, pressing on regardless, were wiping the sweat from their brows with paper napkins. There were only nine of them; seven, judging by their conversation in the bus at Heathrow, were East Germans and one, a shy, apprehensive African and a plump untidy man who by his looks could easily have been a confirmed beachcomber from any intellectual foreshore of the Western world. He earned my respect not

only for a superb display of one-upmanship by coolly ordering a second éclair when even the perspiring East Germans had been forced to retire, but also by reading a large album of piano music throughout the journey as most people would a thriller. I thought that the grave young woman who was serving me would contrast my consumer performance unfavourably with those of the others so when I thanked her I apologized for my failure to eat on to the end confessing, as I pointed at a strained button, that I had already eaten more than I normally did. Instantly she laughed with pleasure and the sudden change from a formal almost melancholy expression into laughter was unexpected and enchanting. I felt utterly reprov'd for having momentarily suspected her of being incapable of fun and I stress it here because it was my first encounter with what I believe is one of the most typical characteristics of the Russians. They are not a smiling people. With them the smile is generally only a preliminary to laughter and this perhaps more than anything else gives them their reputation for melancholy. The nuances of feeling for which the Western world uses the smile are either unknown to them or provided for in other ways. Indeed later I gathered from my Russian friends that they find our frequent use of the smile rather tiresome and meaningless and tending to bring laughter into disrepute. But for laughter itself the Russians have a great capacity and respect. I have enjoyed laughing with them more than with any other group of people except my own primitive countrymen in Africa. And because this young air hostess was the first to show me the laugh behind the mask I continue to remember her with gratitude.

Soon after we had a demonstration of gaiety of a different sort. Our trays had hardly been cleared away when an officer appeared in the alleyway. He was the first of his kind that I had ever seen and I was struck at once by the looseness of the uniform on his stocky frame. Even the

slight draught from the ventilators appeared enough to make his wide trousers and coat flap about him. Male clothes in Russia, except on some of the city young, seemed designed deliberately to flap. It may be that Soviet tailors are still secretly obsessed with memories of an idealized peasants' blouse and loose trousers that could be tucked into jack-boots without impeding the movement of the knees, but whatever the reason I have never seen so many flapping figures as in Russia—except when I was young, among the Boers of my own people. However, standing there apparently indifferent to his passengers, the officer beckoned imperiously to his three hostesses. They immediately went to him and all four vanished behind thick grey curtains. Ten minutes later the three young women re-appeared, laughing among themselves and obviously keen to share the good news with us. My own hostess made straight for me and said: “You will be glad to know that it is now Yuri Gagarin Day. The captain of the aircraft sent for us so that we could all congratulate and thank one another on our achievement.”

Two things about her announcement impressed me. The first showed how the whole crew had identified themselves with Gagarin's achievement and I imagined that, in this, I was looking into a microcosm of the Soviet world. It implied that their minds might be conditioned first to depersonalize and then to collectivize Russian achievements as thoroughly as they had collectivized industry. There certainly was no trace of any temptation to personality-worship in my young air-hostess for when I congratulated her, saying how much we all admired Gagarin and what a charming as well as brave person he appeared to be, she immediately became very serious.

“Oh yes, he is nice enough but in my view there is a danger of people making too much of him,” she replied. “After all he was only a link in the chain and to my mind achieved less than Titov and the others. Titov's was a far

more serious contribution to science than Gagarin's. And the ones after him were greater still."

The second thing that impressed me was the way she assumed that I would be as delighted as she was and that the occasion, like the food, had to be shared equally with us. Yet there was something just a little forbidding in having one's participation so much taken for granted. I had an uneasy feeling there could be the makings of a *hubris* in this—a tendency not merely to collectivize but also to universalize Russian experience and achievement, automatically converting their relative into an absolute significance. However, I rebuked myself for making too much of too little. I warned myself that I must not read between the lines before I had read the lines. I had anticipated that this might be the main inducement to error when persons brought up in our comparatively frank way of life came into contact with closed systems which display only selected aspects of themselves as I had been told did the Soviet Union.

Meanwhile, it was amazing how on such a clear day the characters of the countries on the way to Moscow stood out on the ground below, even at thirty thousand feet and at six hundred miles per hour. Thus England appeared indefinable and unpredictable like the national spirit, absolute only in its commitment to its own processes of growth, but with many a twist and turn in the landscape as it resolved its difficulties on earth. That "the longest way round is the shortest way there" seemed implicit in this pattern and under the mellow light of spring towns, villages, farms, meadows, hedges and gardens seemed to grow out of it like the finger-prints of a thousand and one seasons which one reads in cross-cuts of the great redwood trees of California. The Channel itself was little more than a flashing stream, and then suddenly, after the pragmatic earth of Britain was the Continent, clear-cut, articulate and doctrinaire. One had just a glimpse of the Gallic lands to the south before Holland absorbed the whole

of the view, establishing itself in one's senses as a major act of will and the deliberate product of an obstinate determination to have its own way. After England it was astonishing how often the Dutch scene followed the shortest distances between points, took short cuts, was managed, arranged and abounded in precise geometric patterns wherever river and ocean permitted them. Germany was only a glimmer of yellow sand on the horizon, but Denmark was laid out neat, polished and orderly like a soldier's equipment for inspection on a parade ground. The pattern appeared dedicated to a conception wherein everything, even beauty, was put to definite use. Over Copenhagen the day was blurred with afternoon smoke and one was dismayed by the speed with which our own pace, together with the sun's, had advanced the approach of night. The Baltic in that ash-blond light was a shallow shadow and only after Riga did one see again a pattern of manufactured land under the levelling light. The change was startling for the basic design of Europe was not asserted except by outposts, themselves threatened by an immense mass of featureless earth and forest advancing from the East. Towns, villages and farms still repeated spasmodically in miniature the shapes of the lands to the west, and the sun would pick on a set of walls, or a spire, only to reveal them illuminated and immersed in the increasing solemnity and shapelessness of the earth. Soon however even these fragments of the ancient pattern melted into the older scene. One was abandoned utterly to a level-topped vision of a strange flat earth stretching from horizon to horizon, its cover of forest and lengthening afternoon shadows rarely broken by any clearing or act of man, though often gleaming with the burnt-out silver of lakes, streams and marshes. It was extraordinary how empty and vast the earth now looked from such a height. I stared at it long trying in vain to encompass it in some single envelope of imagination. But for the first time I was excited by the

feeling that I was on the verge of encountering an earth as abundant as in Africa. Yet there was one difference. When I discovered what it was it turned out to be a mere trifle, yet it affected me. There was no smoke rising up from this new earth below me. I remembered the smoke over the housetops of England and the smoke always rising from savannah, plain and forest in remotest Africa, and somehow this absence of smoke made a dismal impact on me. It was as well, perhaps, that I did not know then how characteristic this was of the Russian scene and how I would come to appreciate Homer's lines wherein Athena tells the gods of Odysseus's longing to see again "the smoke leaping up over his native Ithaca".

I landed on the international airport at Sheremetevo some twenty miles from Moscow just before sundown. The air was surprisingly warm, the light like olive oil laying a gloss on the slender pines and birches of the woods that still crowd in on the capital. The calm was immense and not a shiver of air stirred the frail branches. Beyond the trees rose neither mountains, hills, mounds nor even towers. On such level earth in so level an evening the sky achieved its fullness of space and height. And that, too, was very Russian. Great as the effect of this immense land is on the senses, that of the sky is always greater. After the bustle, the noise and the traffic of Heathrow, the stillness was astounding. All the time while I was in the modest and unpretentious reception building not a single aircraft arrived or left the airport. It felt oddly isolated and provincial as if I had arrived not at an entrance to one of the world's greatest capitals but in some remote country backwater. Our reception in the airport building, too, added to this impression. Gone was the formality which had seen us into the plane. Instead a rural casualness was characteristic of the persons who met us. I detected no sign of rigidity, arrogance or suspiciousness in my own reception. It is true there were still no smiles and the customs and immigration officials, leaning casually in

their loose uniforms against their counters, looked almost indifferent. They stamped my declaration forms without reading them and passed my bag without opening it. They took no interest in the books and papers I carried. I have seldom seen officials fussing less. All the time a young Intourist girl stood by me telling me what to do in admirable English, and when it was done she summoned a car with a mere wave of the hand so that in a remarkably short time I was on my way through the woods to Moscow.

## *Chapter Two*

### MOSCOW-THE CAPITAL

MOSCOW STANDS AT the centre of the great Russian plain but just beyond the woods some wind of time had raised a gentle ground swell in the earth. Breasting the first slow wave of land, I saw the city itself in the last light of the sun. I do not know precisely what I had expected but I was disappointed. I suspect it was partly connected with a vague belief induced in so many persons of my generation that somehow the horrors of revolution, civil war, invasion, famine and all the many other cruel denials of life inflicted on the Russian people would be redeemed by a breakthrough into something truly new and original. And there was little to be seen in the city's skyline just then that was particularly beautiful, noble, visionary or original, except the light of an unusually pure evening upon it. That light was alchemical and it transformed Moscow into a city of gold, the tops of the spires and pinnacles drawing the rigid forms of the few skyscrapers after them into arrows of gold aimed at the arched and timeless blue. The gold, alas, declined as we came nearer into putty-coloured bricks and concrete slabs piled upon one another in huge square building blocks like cakes of yellow Sunlight soap heaped into shape. Though new these building blocks were not only unoriginal but depressingly like those I had seen in East Berlin. It was a sobering thought that despite all the miles separating Moscow and Berlin the architectural pattern could be the