

It's the Bluff That Baffles a Visitor to Russia

By James Morris

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LONDON—When at last you stand, after half a lifetime of speculation, beside the garish bubble-domes of St. Basil's Cathedral, with the brooding expanse of Red Square before you and two giggling girls sliding on their blue serge bottoms down the snowy banks outside the Kremlin walls—when at last you get to Russia, nothing is altogether unfamiliar, but even less is it crystal clear.

Long years of dim hearsay have prepared you for this moment, and your mind is fuzzed with a rambling accretion of half-knowledge, vast resonant images from the immortal novels, snatches of dogma and ideological jargon, the Great Game and the purge trials and the Stalingrad sword and the doctors' plot and the Aswan Dam and the virgin lands and David Oistrakh and the State Circus; caviar, too, and the Bolshoi, and Socialist Realism, and blurred dignitaries in bulky coats at May Day parades, and little dogs in rockets, and peasants at railway stations, and countless semi-digested profundities from the feature pages of the Sunday papers.

The door of your mind may still be open, as the policeman waves you back on the Kremlin pavement with an irritable blast of his whistle; but a tangled mass of bric-a-brac clutters its interior like a pile of old furniture stuffed in an attic.

Bluff and Contradiction

FOR ALL THIS backlog of preconceptions, however, the stranger moves through contemporary Russia in a daze of baffled surprise, for never was a country more heavily freighted with bluff, secrecy and contradiction. For most of us, the current image of Mother Russia presents her as a warming, budding, evolving kind of state, marshaled by scientists and technicians of great accomplishment, moving in gigantic strides toward material supremacy and guided by a certain gruff, reluctant liberalism.

"What's the shops like over there then?" a taxi driver asked me when I returned to London from Moscow. "About the same as here, I suppose?" Most of us in the West, knocked askew by successive Russian sputniks, vaguely suppose that the Soviet Union has more or less caught us up; and half of us were inclined to believe Khrushchev when he told us that by 1965 the Soviet standard of living would surpass the American.

This hazy notion will give the stranger his first, and most elemental, surprise about the Russia of 1960. Unless Khrushchev has some quite different criteria from ours, or was using his words in a peculiarly Russian sense, his claim is at merely misleading; it is positively grotesque.

We scarcely expect the Soviet suburban housewife to be driving to the supermarket in her station wagon, and we can only admire the transformation that has evidently overcome Russia since the Revolution, or even since the war. But since the Russians themselves choose to make comparisons with the highest standards of the capitalist West, the gullible stranger must prepare himself for a shock.

It is no use, the sputnik does not make a difference. In the hand is worth a dozen in the living in outer space. Ask any woman in the queues wearily for her portion in the Moscow market, or hastily pretend not to be interested in Vogue.

Simple—And Backward

IT IS NOT merely the absence of washing machines, cars or automatic cocktail shakers; one of the most likable aspects of modern Russian life is its surviving simplicity, epitomized by the entrancing wooden toys with which little Russians are still enviably satisfied. Russia remains terribly backward in fundamentals.

Urban housing is desperately short, with people often living cheek-by-jowl four or five to a room. Food supplies are erratic and the basic city diet is lumpy and starchy. Prices are very high, workmanship is depressingly low, the general texture of life remains threadbare and shoddy.

Moscow itself reminds me, time and again, of an out-of-date Chicago, from the brawny roaring mechanisms that clear away its sludge to the feudal

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skyscrapers which, standing balefully above the river bridges, are strikingly reminiscent of Col. McCormick's Tribune building. But if the cities of Russia are decades behind their American equivalents, the rural lag can almost be measured in centuries.

Nor is the legend of Russian technique, so blandly accepted by the world at large, easily confirmed by the eager stranger. The Russians may be able to photograph the moon, but they cannot yet build a decent block of flats. They can compute the celestial orbits, but they add up the grocery bill, not very quickly, on an abacus.

The radishes at the Moscow Central Market are flown in from Baku by jet, but the electric lights of Russia burn with dismal apathy. The city telephones are dreadful, and the notorious techniques of Russian bureaucracy are demonstrated to you, the very moment you arrive, by the bumble-headed, carbon-stained, butter-fingered officials at the customs desk.

Hundreds of thousands of scientists pour out of the Russian universities each year, but so far they have not done much to smooth the surface of everyday life. The West has long been in the nylon era, but Mother Russia still wears calico.

Limited Efficiency

IT IS A NATION of specialists. "What are you a specialist in?" they are always asking you. "Are you a specialist in bridges, in television, in textiles, in semantics, in hydrology?" "I would like to see," says a helpful sentence in an Intourist phrase book, "a working model of a sludge dredger."

It is only in severely limited fields, at rarefied levels of distinction, that supreme efficiency is apparent. The Moscow underground is the best in the world, but the milk-run flights of Aeroflot are organized with astonishing slapdash carelessness. The Lenin Library subscribes to the Kipling Journal and the Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society in Edinburgh, but the service is even the best Russian restaurants is so awful as to be a national joke.

David Oistrakh is one of the supreme artists of our time, but the standard of amateur music-making in Moscow is, I am told, gratefully low. Obraztsov's puppets are incomparably brilliant, but Violetta at the Leningrad opera the other night was so excruciatingly inept that I ran away and ate red caviar in my bath.

Exquisite are the ballerinas of Russia, but the Bolshoi decor often looks like a setting for one of the sicklier Walt Disney fables. Lean as tigers were the young Russians, who swept the board at Squaw Valley, but if you walk upstairs in Moscow University, the student beside you will probably be out of breath long before you are. There is no sense of steely direction to life in Russia today, nor do affairs move with a click, a zip or a zoom. Even in the space age, there is to the flavor of this paradoxical state an endearing suggestion of the ramshackle.

Cheerful—And Careless

THERE IS ALSO, you will discover to your pleasure, a powerful sense of human imperfection. Now as ever, the Russians are an emotional, demonstrative people. They live carelessly and cheerfully, spending their money with reckless abandon, drinking and eating too much, sleeping, working and idling at erratic and unpredictable hours, now staying up all night in hell-for-leather gaiety, now lying in bed until tea time. They like to sit around and chat.

When one of the Leningrad students' hostels recently announced compulsory physical training each morning, on the first day everybody turned up; but over the weeks attendance gradually declined, enthusiasm waned, authority weakened, until in the end only two inflexible Chinese were left doing their jerks half-naked in the snow.

So the stranger adds another load of junk to his Russian attic. I do not report all this in spite, contempt or foolish dudgeon. I believe myself that communism is one effective way of hoisting a primitive people to a degree of material welfare, and I am sure that the more comfortable the Russians live, the happier they are; the shinier their chromium plate and the smarter their cotton frocks, the better it will be for all of us.

The sensible stranger will not be piqued to find so many of his visions falsified. On the contrary, he will be happily relieved to discover that Sputnik Russia is not just a test-tube state, all done to formulae, but a jolly, fallible, unpredictable place where 40 years of the new despotism has failed to even out the bumps.

Everybody goes to Russia now

days and the Iron Curtain seems a little tarnished and rusted. The xenophobic suspicion that has veiled Russia since the Revolution is, so the experts assure us, gradually being dispelled, and the old, cold Stalinist heart of the place is thawing.

Ten years ago, if you asked the Soviet Embassy in London for a tourist visa, they would not even bother to answer your letter. Today they will give you one the same afternoon, with an effusive smile and a shower of pamphlets.

When you get to Moscow, all the same, you will discover that Russia still keeps her secrets, tourists or no tourists; that though you are free to wander where you will and can penetrate almost anywhere if you are prepared to put your foot in the door and argue, nevertheless the deeper enigmas of the Soviet Union remain inviolate.

The fringes of her mystery may be dispersing, the edge of the riddle may be unraveled, but to the great questions of contemporary Russia, we still do not know the answers. The pundits may pontificate, the propagandists prate; but we still do not understand the intentions of Russian policy, we do not really know how stable the regime is, we cannot name the men of power in Moscow and we never know from one day to another what the Russians are going to do next.

Curtain's Still There

ALL THIS will strike you forcibly in Moscow even today, for inside that strange capital the Iron Curtain is still gauntly erect. Diplomats are still rigidly circumscribed, can meet only carefully approved Russians, hardly ever go into a Russian home and are still overheard by buried boudoir microphones. Westerners are still compelled to live in specified ghetto-like apartment blocks, guarded by gendarmes, where they settle in hugger-mugger discontent one on top of another, surrounded by vast stocks of tinned food and toilet paper imported from Denmark.

It is true that the Russians no longer jam Western broadcasts, and I met several citizens who like to listen to the BBC. It is true that a slick American propaganda magazine is for sale, and that a British equivalent is likely to appear shortly. Russians are no longer whisked away to detention camps for talking to you in the street, nor will the small boy who pesters you for chewing gum be subjected to any dreadful homework.

The papers are full of peace and

goodwill toward everybody except Dr. Adenauer; the Muscovites flock eagerly around every fintailed, salmon-pink Cadillac, and if you proclaim yourself to be British and proud of it, by George, nobody will shy away from you. On the contrary, everybody will instantly start talking about last year's British Book Exhibition and ask if you know Stephen Spender, Jack London or any of that lot.

Nevertheless, it is still practically impossible to buy Western newspapers in Moscow, except the lackey broadsheets. Only a breath, only a whisper of the free West has yet seeped into Moscow. The big national exhibitions, delegations, trade missions come and go, leaving behind them only a thin, black market sediment of rock 'n' roll and Life; and the tourists stream through like wedding guests, sipping the champagne curiously before going home to gossip.

Unpredictable Winds

RUSSIAN LAW has undoubtedly taken a turn toward the fairer and franker, but you will not really discover, as you pace the Moscow pavements, whether the days of terror have gone for good.

Nobody hears the sinister midnight knock nowadays, and the dread Lubyanka Prison is an insurance office. Russia certainly does not feel like a bullied, oppressed or frightened country, but how soon the winds could change, how subtle are the pressures of orthodoxy and conformity, nobody knows.

Has communism really worked in Russia? Could the same progress have been achieved by other, less brutal means—foreign investment, for example, or Lenin's mixed economy? You can see for yourself that people are reasonably well-fed, restaurants full, shops busy; but you will hear innumerable tales of ghastly overcrowding, speculation, nepotism, unfair privilege. You will sample the threadbare quality of the goods in the department stores and will observe (if of a nervous disposition) that the ceiling of your host's drawing room, erected two or three years ago, seems to be supported by beams of green wood and is apparently about to collapse.

Compared with itself before the Revolution, Moscow is no doubt a thriving capital, its mansions vanished but its working people snatched from worse degradation. But could it be better, you will wonder; have the ends justified the means? Is it a promise or a disappointment, pace-maker or runner-up? Nobody really knows, and Russia certainly will not tell you.

You must take on trust the staggering Soviet claims of industrial expansion, rocketry, atomic energy, agricultural initiative and all the arrogant bragging that sometimes overcomes your Intourist guide. Russian statistics are often based upon different premises from ours; but even if the system is the same, there is no way of confirming their truth.

Wiser men than I am accept them as generally accurate and vigorously propagate the vision of the new, kinder, irresistible Soviet Union that so dominated my own thinking when I first flew in to Moscow. To fools, though, is reserved the privilege of rushing in, and after a couple of weeks in Russia, I will be bold and brash.

I do not believe all the Russians say. I sniff at their statistics. There seems to me something illusory, deceptive, misleading in the air of Russia today, something that niggles at my intuitions and sharpens my skepticism.

Do you know that momentary, smiling hush that overcomes the dinner table when some not very bright member of the family is having his leg pulled? Well, it feels to me a little like that.

The Sentimental Judge

ONE MORNING in Moscow, I visited a divorce court and watched a hatchet-faced, bespectacled woman dispensing swift justice, wearing a blue dress with a white collar, like a school matron. She was assisted by a mouse-like lady on her right, and a diffident man in a jerkin on her left, and she fairly rattled through the marriages, sending couple after couple in cheerful dissolution into the hall.

When the court recessed, this formidable jurist invited me into the judges' room and asked me what questions I had in mind about the procedure of her court. I racked my brains to think of one—it had been, in fact, the most self-explanatory judicial process I had ever witnessed—while the mouse and the jerkin man waited anxiously behind my shoulder. But failing ignominiously, I asked instead if the Comrade Judge would mind telling me the story of her own life, this being my first acquaintance with female Russian divorce court justices.

Her reaction was instant and disconcerting. She burst into tears. Asked that particular question, she told me between snuffles, she always burst into tears, for her childhood as an orphan had been harsh and sad and the very memory was still a torment to her, so many long years ago, her beloved parents dead, dead, and she just a waif. . . "Stop! Stop!" cried my interpreter, hastily burrowing into her handbag for a handkerchief. "Stop! You'll make me cry, too!"

And so we sat there in the bare little room, wet and sniffly with sentiment, the mouse shaking her head in motherly distress, the jerkin man clearing his throat gruffly, while outside the impatient litigants, brushing up their grievances, waited their turn for release.

Plain Russianness

SUCH CHEKOVIAN moments still abound in Russia, and it is a moot point how much of the national oddity stems from the queerer tenets of communism and how much is just plain Russianness. The pall of uniformity may have descended upon the political expression of the Russians, making them either numb or intolerable, but in other affairs they remain stanchly individual still.

The myth of the nameless, faceless, mindless Russian multitude is as outdated as the grim Stalinist thirties that engendered it. The Russians remain a quirky people, a volatile, generous, touched-to-the-quick people—not glamorously romantic, like the Poles, or dogged like the Dutch, or complacent like the Swedes, but plain, stocky, heart-ruled, touched faintly with the brush of the Orient, like the weird, fretted skyscrapers that stand sentinel over their capital.

This survival of traditional traits, this resilience of Russianness, has helped to cherish the hope that Russia is developing into a different kind of organism, something less doctrinaire and rigid, more liberal, more libertarian, nearer the values and ideals of Western democracy.

As living standards rise, so the argument runs, as education spreads, as the citizenry becomes less deferentially proletarian, as the old class envies wither, as Russia grows stronger, more confident, less racked by complexes and suspicions, so the Soviet Union will become more like other nations. The universal profit motive will wiggle its gleaming head again and the Soviet people will enter upon the process called by the Foreign Service, with a fond but throaty accent, *enbourgeoisement*.

Need of the Mystic

EVEN THE simple stranger can detect some omen of this development. The new respectability of religion is one. "Only old people go to church," proclaims the party line—but as keen observers have noted, they have been old now for nearly half a century.

"Are you a Christian?" I once asked my driver, as we pushed our way into a packed church. "Not now I'm not," he answered seriously, "but maybe I will be when I'm older." Even the bizarre idolization of Lenin is a kind of return to normal, in that it recognizes the need of ordinary people for some element of the mystic in their

Another sign, though scarcely catalytic yet, is a rebirth of commercial consciousness. By and large, Russia seems to be run on a sort of cost-plus basis. The value of money seems to be more theoretical than real, and production is boosted mercilessly without much attention to expense.

Today, however, for the first time some of the technical journals of Russian industry discuss progress in terms of practical economics. A vocal body of opinion, observing the still dismal state of agriculture, believes that a new infusion of plain private enterprise is necessary to vivify it.

In Moscow, everyone talks about speculation in dachas and the visitor can scarcely evade the commercial instincts of the touts, who buttonhole you repeatedly with bids for your currency, your boots, your latest Perry Como or your copy of the New Yorker.

An Inherited Passion

INDEED, their passion for things Western is itself a symptom of *enbourgeoisement*. The old Russian novels are full of gentlemanly xenophiles talking French in the house, laying out their gardens in the English manner, addicts of German thoroughness or Pall Mall reticence. Today this tendency is inherited by the classless generation of young men that has been created by the Revolution—not the first generation of Communist man, but the second, now in its roaring twenties.

Among intelligent young Russians, as even the casual traveler will discover, there is an almost fanatical hunger for the art, thought, literature and customs of the West. A young man in Kiev told me that he had made a three-day visit to Minsk solely because a friend of his there had acquired an Agatha Christie novel but would allow it to be read only within the four walls of his own house.

And it is of course these new men, these bright, personable, intelligent, impervious people, who offer the experts their chief hope for a shift of values in Communist Russia. They are an undeniably attractive lot—indeed, they seem to be astonishingly like the classless generation that has been created, by totally different means, at home in England.

The New Causticism

LIKE YOUNG Socialists in England, they look back upon the fusty enthusiasms of their elders—the parades and the medal-ribbons, the slogans and embalmed heroes, the chauvinism, the party formalities—with an air of fond dismissal. "I hate all uniforms," said an Aeroflot officer when I congratulated him upon the splendor of his greatcoat. "There's something so—so middle-aged about them!"

In Russia, you can still hardly escape the ambitious formalists—plump young officials in prosperous suits, spouting the party line. ("But, Mr. Morris, what a strange opinion to express. Don't you realize that Mr. Molotov was involved in the anti-Party plot?") But it is even harder to miss the invigorating causticism of these blossoming free-thinkers.

I hope it all comes true. I hope there is evolving a newly benevolent Russia, a mighty force for good in the world, freed of its old complexes and inhibitions. I hope the pundits are right, and with all my heart I wish the Russians well.

But to be honest with you, I have my doubts. I felt all too strongly the haze of uncertainty that hangs above the Russian scene, the sense of hidden movements and unsuspected motives, the fog and queerness of it all. I went to Russia an ignorant, ill-read stranger, and ignorant, bewildered, half-convinced, irrevocably alien I remain.

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