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MOSCOW RULES

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The Red Army Seizes Control Of U.S.S.R. in New Thriller

Moscow Rules
By Robert Moss
Villard \$16.95, 390 pages
Reviewed by John Podhoretz

Robert Moss, co-author with Arnaud de Borchgrave of the best-selling "The Spike" and "Monimbó" and sole scribe of "Death Beam," has made a successful career out of anti-communist thrillers. His new novel, "Moscow Rules," is the story of a Soviet military officer whose brilliant career in the service of the Soviet Union's armed forces both conceals and abets an almost absurd plan: to initiate a coup and take over the reins of government in the Soviet Union.

Mr. Moss is well-equipped for his profession. Before he took up his novelist's pen, he was editor of the Economist magazine's Foreign Report, a newsletter about espionage that was, during his tenure, the most accurate source on intelligence in the Western world. He is

one of the world's leading experts on the KGB (he broke the story of the Bulgarian connection in the plot to assassinate John Paul II), and knows Russia like the back of his hand.

Well-equipped, perhaps; but judging from his first three books, not at all talented. To be sure, "The Spike" created an international sensation upon its release in 1980. But that was more due to its controversial roman à clef revelations about the way Soviet intelligence spreads disinformation through the American press, and to its charge that a certain progressive Washington think tank was a Soviet espionage front, than to its qualities as a novel.

Those were nil; its preposterous plot concerned a left-wing journalist who sees the truth about the Soviet Union, only to have his story killed by his newspaper. There were stopovers for a Jane Fonda character brainwashed by the KGB and a National Security adviser who is actually a Soviet agent. A political thriller must present a wildly implausible plot but present it in completely plau-

sible terms; it must make the unbelievable believable. This "The Spike" did not even attempt to do, and so it wasn't even a good read.

His next two were perhaps even worse; "Death Beam" is practically unreadable, while the unintentionally hilarious "Monimbó" piles up more bodies per page than the entire fifth act of "Hamlet." Both books had very short rides on the best-seller lists, thus proving that readers had caught on to the problems of "The Spike" and were unwilling to entertain much more from Mr. Moss.

It would be unfortunate if the same were to happen with "Moscow Rules." Mr. Moss continues to have major problems with his similes: Someone is described as "crowded behind his desk like a racehorse confined in a narrow stall," while an old man's legs are "loose and brittle, like a wounded bird's." But despite the infelicities of his prose, and his textbookish narrative voice, Mr. Moss has made a quantum leap as a thriller writer, and a similar leap as a novelist.

John Podhoretz is features editor and critic-at-large of The Washington Times.

The plotting for the coup begins when the teen-age Sasha Preobrazhensky is growing up in Moscow in the late 1950s, the son of a soldier who died on the German front in World War II. But then Sasha discovers that his father had not been killed defending Mother Russia, as Sasha had been told, but for attempting to save a German child from being molested by an intelligence officer named Topchy.

Sasha decides to avenge his father's murder. Topchy has become a KGB colonel, and to get to him Sasha must join the ranks of the Soviet upper crust. But as time goes on, Sasha realizes that the problem is not specifically Topchy, but the entire system. He must infiltrate it, must become one of its most effective players, and then destroy it.

But that will exact a price. While they are at college, his lover, Tatyana, begins hanging around with a poet whom Sasha is forced to denounce publicly as part of his plan to rise in the estimation of the Communist Party. He loses her love, and she publicly protests the poet's arrest. Sasha warns her that she will be arrested if she keeps it up, but she refuses his advice with sneering contempt. She is, indeed, arrested, and shipped off to Siberia, where she kills herself.

Sasha will continue to face the same dilemma: Though his aim is of utmost importance, how much will he be forced to sacrifice for it? How many evil acts will he have to commit to stay on course?

He makes a loveless marriage with the daughter of a powerful general, and begins making the contacts with others in the military, the party, and the KGB to make his plan work.

He also goes to New York to work as a military intelligence agent. There, in Bloomingdale's, he finds himself face to face with Tatyana's double, a beautiful young New Yorker with whom he falls in love. When the CIA cottons to the affair, it decides to use Elaine for its own purposes in an effort to get Sasha to defect.

But Sasha leaves New York to go back and serve in the military command. He volunteers for service in Afghanistan, where he finds a Soviet army frustrated and unable to cope with the fanatical rebels. But for Sasha, Afghanistan proves

a military coup d'etat could be carried off today. It is convincing, entirely believable.

The question of believability is essential because it is on the rocks of reality that all too many novels founder. If it has anything, "Moscow Rules" has an immediacy and a sense of the possible that makes it almost prescient.

"Moscow Rules" tells the story of Alexander Sergeyovich Preobrazhensky, a major general in the Red army. "Sasha" to his friends, Preobrazhensky is the son-in-law and principal aide to Marshal Alexei Ivanovich Zotov, chief of the general staff.

Preobrazhensky is a name immediately familiar to students of Russian history. Named for the village in which Peter the Great spent some time as a child, the Preobrazhensky was the senior guards infantry regiment of the Imperial Russian Army. Mr. Moss purposefully chose that name for his protagonist.

"The name Preobrazhensky has a heraldic ring to any Russian ear," he said. "As a regiment created by the young Peter, its officers, among other things, sat in judgment of those accused of corruption."

In "Moscow Rules," Sasha too sits in judgment on the fantastically corrupt Soviet regime, bound up as it is in a web of greed and deceit that immobilizes the leadership and extends into every corner of the land.

"It's a strange thing to live in my country," Sasha tells a friend. "Ninety percent of what you are told is a lie, but the lies are more familiar than the truth, so it is the truth that seems unbelievable."

"There's a permanent contradiction between what you see and what you hear. People get along by rejecting the evidence of their own eyes. But the people are suffocating. It's only the ones at the top who can breathe."

Readers of Mr. Moss' earlier novel "Death Beam" know him as a writer intimately familiar with the Soviet military-industrial complex. As co-author, with Arnaud De Borchgrave, of the best-selling "The Spike" and "Monimbo," Mr. Moss has proven to be a stylist of fertile imagination and abundant descriptive talents.

He has something else, as well: a deep understanding of the

Soviet system and the nature of the men who run it.

A prize-winning Australian journalist and former editor of the influential intelligence bulletin of The Economist, Mr. Moss is well-known to American audiences. He has written for several U.S. publications, including The New York Times Magazine, National Review, Commentary, and the New Republic.

The Soviets best remember him, however, for his role in preparing British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's "Iron Lady" speech in the late 1970s. It earned him the undying enmity of the Kremlin. An editorial in Izvestia, the Soviet government newspaper, denounced him as "a serious threat to detente."

Mr. Moss said, "Put yourself in the skull of a middle-ranked Russian officer. Three leaders totter and die: Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, and now the ill [Konstantin] Chernenko, who can't even manage to work his way through a speech.

"What that middle-ranked officer is viewing is the visible decomposition of Communist Party rule."

"The Communist system," he went on, "has been allowed to transform itself into a corrupt, baksheesh system. Yet while the Western pundits talk about [their apparent Mikhail] Gorbachev, the Soviet system has not even begun to resolve the long-term problem of transition [of political power]."

"It can't even cope with any of the truly serious problems, such as agricultural failures, and, importantly, Afghanistan."

If there is a turning point in "Moscow Rules," it is Sasha's voluntary posting to Afghanistan.

There, in the desolate, forbidding mountains of that hard land Sasha discovers firsthand the disaffection and, ultimately, the alienation of the Soviet officer corps.

"The time will come," says a character in "Moscow Rules," "when the army will have to clean house."

The words — spoken tentatively at first, then with greater conviction and disdain — fire Sasha's desire to rid his country of the corrupt rule of the commissars.

"The situation in Afghanistan is for the Soviet military leadership reminiscent of how many Americans felt about Vietnam," Mr. Moss said.

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The difference, he said, is that in the Soviet Union the military is not blamed by the people, who until fairly recently were largely unaware of the dimensions of the problem or the cost it exacted in Russian blood. The army is viewed not as the molder of policy, merely as its faithful executor.

"The military has achieved a great deal of power in Moscow," he said. "The question is, will it be allowed to extend that power?"

Since the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional Government in October 1917 and



established the "dictatorship of the proletariat," every Soviet leader, including Lenin, has lived in fear that the army one day would turn on its masters.

It wasn't long before the fear was realized.

On March 7, 1921, sailors in the great naval fortress at Kronstadt in the Gulf of Finland rose against the Bolsheviks. They demanded that Lenin live up to his promises and put an end to Bolshevik political domination.

The Kronstadt Rebellion was short-lived. Eleven days later, forces loyal to the regime put it down with enormous bloodshed.

In the late 1930s, Joseph Stalin, fearing a plot against him in the ranks of the army, ordered virtually the entire officer corps executed. The effect of that ghastly episode was to bear bitter fruit when Hitler's panzer divisions crushed the Red army in the spring of 1940 and swept to the very gates of Moscow.

"Today," Mr. Moss said, "Western pundits say the army is too controlled" by its political cad-

res to pose a threat to the regime. "However, 'Moscow Rules' shows one way the military could overthrow the party and take control: by using Spetsnaz."

Spetsnaz units are the Praetorian Guard of the Red army. "There are about 30,000 members of Spetsnaz," said Mr. Moss. The name is an acronym for the Russian words Special Operations.

Spetsnaz operates in four-man teams specially trained for work behind enemy lines. Officers and men are fluent in the languages and customs of target countries. Their mission is to eliminate political and military leaders, capture command and control centers, and destroy strategic installations such as airbases, power plants and nuclear reactors.

"Spetsnaz is not organized like the Green Berets or the British Special Air Service," Mr. Moss said. "They generally are under the orders of individual military districts, or even regional commands."

"They are ethnically segregated, with every officer and virtually all of the men being Russian. As a matter of fact, I've never even heard of any Central Asians or other nationalities in Spetsnaz," he added. "There are no Jews, no non-Byelorussians."

One could assume that their loyalty to the regime would be beyond reproach, but that would be delusory, Mr. Moss says. As he seeks to show in his novel, nothing in the Soviet Union is ever what it appears to be.

"The highest tribute 'Moscow Rules' could receive came from an ex-officer of the KGB," Mr. Moss said. "He called this a totally Russian novel."

"A summary of the book will be routinely prepared by the KGB and studied at the highest levels. Beyond that, there are men in large numbers in the officer corps who will read it avidly."

The book, it hardly bears mentioning, will not be available to readers in the Soviet Union.

Mr. Moss is an expert on espionage and terrorism, and lectures widely at a number of universities and NATO military academies, including the Royal College of Defense Studies. He is well acquainted with many of the most important Soviet bloc intelligence defectors.

What he learned in those conversations over the years planted the seeds for "Moscow Rules."