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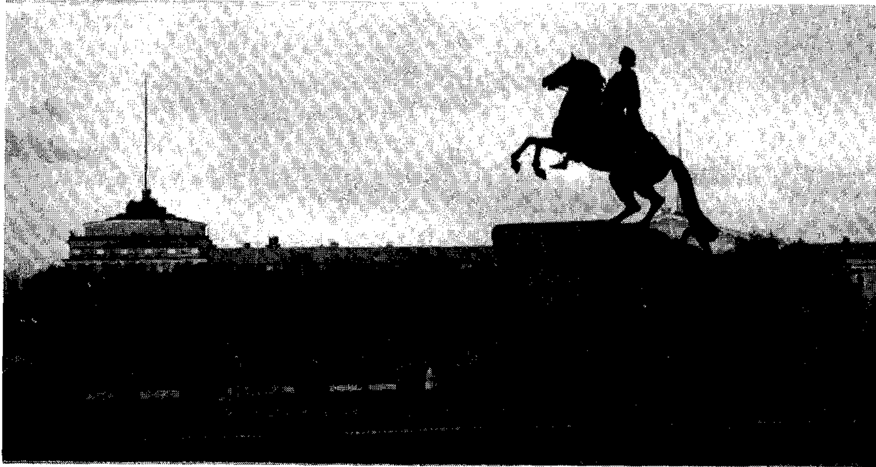


FALCONET'S "BRONZE HORSEMAN," LENINGRAD
A monument to Peter the Great, immortalized by Pushkin

Bircaninova 28b
Belgrade, Yugoslavia
October 28, 1963

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue, New York 17, N. Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

What can one say about Russia, after less than a month in the country? It is, of all countries, the one most given to introspection, and for a century and a half its own powerful intellects, from Pushkin to Pasternak, from Gogol to Berdayev, have mused on its character and destiny. For four hundred years, it has been the subject of endless reports by foreign visitors, some of them apparently prophetic (such as that of the Marquis de Custine), others just plain silly (such as the Webbs). Today, its every breath, physical or spiritual, is recorded and diagnosed not only by the largest intelligentsia in Russia's history, but by a Western corps of reporters, analysts and specialists which must be nearly as large. I recall a professor of Columbia University's Russian Institute telling me that he never felt further from knowing "what was going on in Russia" than in Moscow's Red Square. There is much truth in that feeling, but then it is <u>all</u> true, all the observations, cogitations and musings about Russia since time immemorial, from Pushkin's "Bronze Horseman" down to the latest "Kremlinological" speculations in your favorite newspaper. The land <u>is</u> incredibly vast ("one-sixth of the earth's surface"), its landscape rarely relieved by mountains, the horizon infinite in all directions. Its natural resources <u>are</u> fantastic (the "black earth" of the Don fertile beyond belief), <u>its</u> people unusually warm, generous, spirited, familial. Its government remains a secular theocracy of the most primitive, narrow-minded type, yet it has in

the pursuit of its esoteric goals educated millions, preserved at least some of the traditional Russian and European values, built factories, power stations and finally some apartment houses -- and, in short, created the conditions for its own abolition. All this, and more, is true, has been said before many times, and said better. Those who still prattle about a Russian "enigma" should be ashamed of themselves; Russia is infinitely better known than any of the dozen nations which lie between her and Germany, and whatever difficulties of understanding may have been created by the transient successes of Communist propaganda are largely a thing of the past. Thus, the difficulty lies not in commenting intelligibly on Russian affairs; the difficulty lies in attempting to say (or even observe) something new.

I must confess at this point a personal limitation as well. One may come to a country such as Hungary or Czechoslovakia having read a dozen books and a few hundred press clippings over the years, having perhaps known a dozen natives, seen a few films -- and still, because one's own ignorance is matched by the general ignorance, say something "fresh"; the mind is a tabula rasa, and often first impressions do turn out truest. However, in the case of Russia, I arrived with a mind saturated with the preoccupations of a lifetime. Without yielding here to the temptations of spiritual autobiography, let me merely state that my mother spent her school years in the home of the Ukrainian democratic writer Vladimir Korolenko; my father, a lifelong Social Democrat, knew Lenin in Geneva and lived to write his biography; even my older brother got to know Trotsky and Bukharin in New York; Kerensky, Chernov, Avksentiev, Zenzinov sat around our dinner table in my time; and Irakli Tseretelli advised me to court my wife. It is difficult in such circumstances not merely to say anything "fresh" about Russia, but to see anything at all: every direct perception is immediately inhibited, circumscribed and distorted by memories and old knowledge, personal and historic.

One final disclaimer: Twenty-three days is very little time to see anything in Russia, and the more places one tries to visit the less one really gets out of it. Thus, I did not see the Urals, Siberia, Central Asia, the Baltic, Black or Caspian seacoasts, the far North; and yet each is said to have its own qualities, geographically, historically, culturally distinct. (So vast are the dimensions of "Russia" that I see I have left out the Caucasus, perhaps the most distinct.) What I did do was spend a week each in Moscow and Leningrad, and make one-two day stops in Vilnius (Lithuania), Volgograd, Rostov-on-Don, and Kiev and Poltava in the Ukraine. From Moscow I managed to get to the Tolstoy house at Yasnaya Polyana, south of Tula; from Leningrad to the former imperial suburbs at Peterhof and Pushkin (Tsarskoye Selo); and from Rostov down the Don by boat to Azov. Yet all of this is merely "place-dropping," for the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad alone deserves at least twenty-three days.

These limitations of vision will, I hope, make clear why I now propose to refrain from a generalized, "big-picture" survey of Russia, or even Russia today. For the same broad reasons, any at-

tempt to present a series of travel "notes" would inevitably escalate into a book. I propose instead to offer a number of limited observations on a few aspects of the Russian totality, aspects which I felt to be striking during my tour. But these should be understood merely as random fragments of a personal mosaic, whose larger design remains indistinct. For convenience's sake, I am quite arbitrarily dividing even these fragments (although in reality they cannot be so detached): affairs of culture and the spirit in this letter, the economy and "social" problems in the next. At last, then, let us begin with

The Language. The current trip was the first occasion in my life when I could hear Russian as a "foreign" language. It was, I must note, the first tongue I ever heard; and even though, at the age of five or six, I succumbed to the insidious pressures of "Americanization" and refused to speak it, it remained for me, in the hearing, as much a part of nature, integral and indivisible, as the sky for the non-meteorologist. Even when, a dozen years ago, I formally studied the language for a while, the experience was not one of analysis and philosophical comprehension, but rather somewhat like reactivating some old skill in disuse, such as ice-skating or bicycling. In my case, for various reasons, the skill soon fell again into disuse.

It is only as a result of spending a year speaking and hearing Serbo-Croatian that I am at last able to hear Russian "clean." Serbian (I apologize to the Croat nation for the shorthand) is said to be 70 per cent cognate with Russian, many basic roots and much of the grammar is identical, and natives of the two nations (as well as cultural strays like myself) do not have great difficulty understanding each other. The similarities are not quite as great as those between French and Italian, but they are certainly greater than those between English and German.

And yet-- vive la difference! For, while the precision of French is a foil for the melody of Italian, the Serbian language, as a medium of conversation or literature, serves mainly to vindicate the splendors of the Russian tongue. (I am speaking of the real language, not the hack-Marxist anti-language which dominates political discourse in both countries, and which in the case of Russian bears about as much resemblance to the language of its great writers as Anglo-American newspaper editorials to the language of Yeats.)

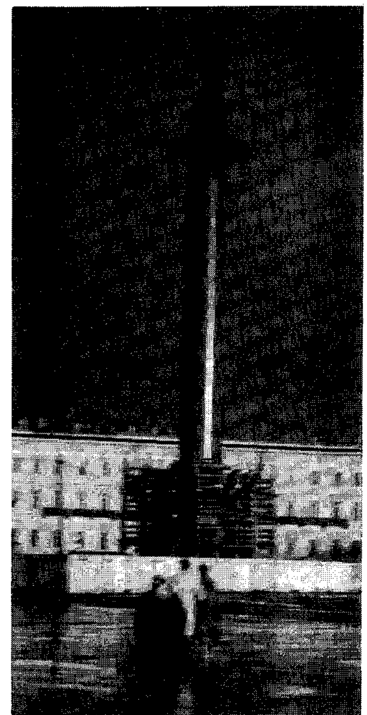
To start, the sound: Where Serbian is characterized by hard consonants, mostly short vowels and sometimes none at all (krv = blood); where Polish and Czech, with somewhat softer consonants, also tend to short, slurred vowels, Russian is a language containing hard and soft consonants, short vowels where needed, but above all -- like Italian -- many long, ever-so-soft vowels, ahs and oos and aws, ees and yous and yaws. This makes it, among other things, a great language for music, despite the rather late development of Russian composition; as the widespread popularity of the Russian folksong and almost any performance of Boris Godunov or Khovanshchina will attest. (Several Western opera-lovers in Moscow declare that Shostakovich's Lady Macbeth of Mzensk, long banned by Stalin, is "without a doubt" the greatest opera of the twentieth century.)

But there is more to the Russian language than soft sound, and where it parts company from Dixie American, Irish English, Provencal French and even Italian is in the emotional richness and terseness of its vocabulary. It is not so much a matter of the nouns and adjectives; English, too, has many words for the same thing, and Italian also has a myriad of suffixes to indicate diminution, affection, contempt, admiration, etc. The marvel in Russian is the verb, which in a dozen texts I have not seen properly explained and which I consider one of the great creations of human civilization. The texts go wrong, in my opinion, in characterizing the famous Russian "aspects" (perfective= I did it, imperfective= I was doing it) as if a pair of verbs is involved. This is done by well-meaning grammarians because each aspect does have its own infinitive, and usually a syllable or two changes between the two aspects. Yet such a characterization, while perhaps helpful to rote-learning beginners, essentially obscures the unique genius of Russian. For, since the perfective aspect has no present tense, and the imperfective only a compound and rather delayed-action future, it becomes suddenly clear -- when one lives with the language in Russia -- that the so-called "pair" is actually one verb; but what a verb! It is the only one I know in any major language which is simple (no auxiliaries) in the present, future, imperfect and past definite tenses; it has as many usable participles and gerunds as English, but again all simple; it can in many cases be made reflexive or impersonal by the addition of a syllable or less; and, perhaps most remarkable, it can, by prefixing as liberal as Latin's, be expanded in meaning, or modified in shading, to cover an enormous range of physical states or emotional attitudes. This much is true of almost all Russian verbs; when one gets into the special world of Russian verbs of motion, the riches become greater still. And finally, when one begins to turn the participles and gerunds into adjectives and nouns, and some of the adjectives into adverbs (all by changing at most two syllables), one at last "sees" the Russian verb as a giant of the forest, an oak or elm which from its sturdy trunk extends its supple branches and varied foliage to the very skies of human emotions. Or -- to come down to earth -- the Russian verb makes possible, if not inevitable, a language of great terseness, subtlety, and emotional precision. (Most of this has been lost in Serbian: whole branches of the verb-"trees" dropped off in the centuries of foreign occupation, while another quarter of the forest was replanted with Germanic and Latinate roots.)

The contrast with English, or at least modern English, is dra-

matic and instructive. For, if the history of verse is any guide, the English verb began declining in color and richness with the Puritans, and the adjective exhausted itself with the Romantics. In the later nineteenth century, writers attempted to camouflage these losses by the long line (in verse) and the long period (in prose), but Eliot and Hemingway in our time made final in literature what had already been plain in the common speech: namely, that English today is pre-eminently a language of nouns, strung together by flat, short, all-purpose verbs and prepositions ("The winter evening settles down, with smells of steaks in passageways....."). Without presuming any hierarchy of values, or inferring which was cause and which effect, one can see clearly that the English language is a superior instrument for economics, science and law, but that Russian is far the richer for poetry and for the fiction and drama of emotions. In Leningrad I saw an excellent performance of Byron's "Don Juan" -- if anything, the Russian translation took in some of the slack of Byron's line and heightened his feelings, sharpening both the drama and the satire; yet it is proverbial that Pushkin cannot be translated into English. On the other hand, where English has two virtually complete political vocabularies, one Anglo-Saxon and the other Norman-Latin, most of the contemporary Russian political terminology has been imported wholesale from German, French and Latin in the last two centuries. One could, but I will not, pursue the implications of this state of affairs *ad infinitum*.

The Faith. It took me nearly three days in Moscow to feel that I was in Russia. I was eating Russian food, drinking Russian vodka, immersing myself in the language; I had seen most of the post-card sights -- Red Square, the Kremlin grounds, the various theaters, the new public housing projects, the subway, airport, various rail stations, stores, markets -- and still had a sense of unreality. Then one morning I was taken to visit the Moscow State University (a hideous Stalinist palace) and from its gardens exposed to a rather good view of the Lenin Stadium and other surrounding points of interest. Leaning on the rail, looking to one side and another, I spied, almost lost in the trees to our left, an unpretentious little church, notable mainly for the vividness of its blue and gold cupolas. On being told that General Kutuzov had "stopped here" in 1812, I walked over, to be rewarded as I approached by the sound of music. The church was in use -- and only then, standing within its humble whitewashed walls, looking at the subtle splendor of its vivid icons, hearing the massed voices of simple men and women raised in the sublime tones of the Orthodox liturgy, then at last I knew I was in Russia. And in my later visits to art museums and theaters as well as to churches, it was impossible to escape the overpowering role played by Byzantine Christianity in Russian culture. Whether viewing the master-


'ALEXANDER COLUMN'
(Leningrad)

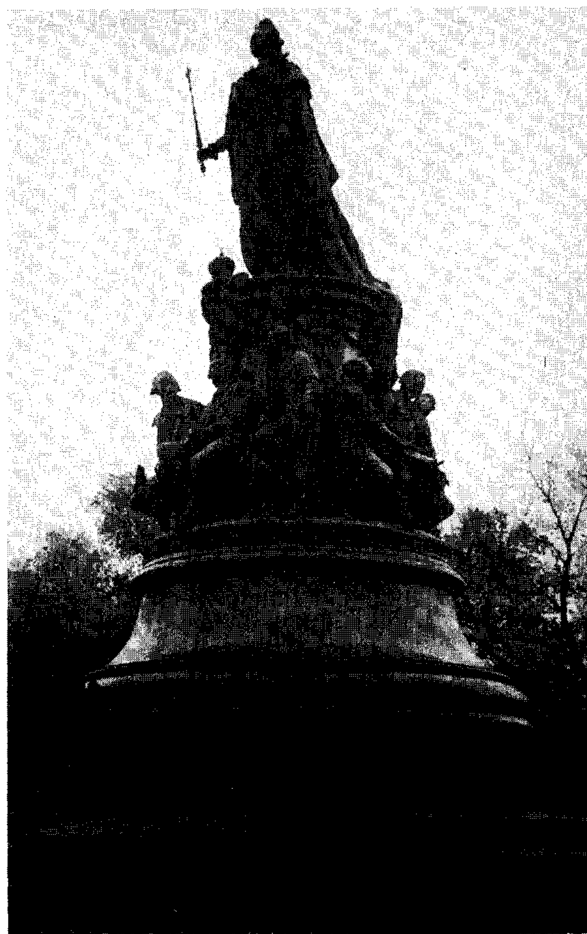
ANGEL FROM THE TROITSKY CATHEDRAL, LENINGRAD

pieces of the iconist Andre Rublyov, listening to the Coronation Scene from Boris Godunov, or watching Tolstoy's Power of Darkness, one is constantly reminded that Orthodoxy is the fundamental matrix of nearly all we call Russian culture. I say "nearly" because there is one other notable tradition, although of relatively recent growth: the Westward-looking (specifically Francophile) "St. Petersburg" tradition epitomized by Pushkin and, to some extent, Turgenev. But this was always a rather fragile plant, appealing more to the cultivated than to the mass; and in painting and music, in the nineteenth century at least, it came to very little.

In the twentieth century, most Russian intellectuals came to realize that, if they were not to root themselves consciously in the Orthodox tradition, the only vital alternative was to throw over all the old forms completely and start from scratch -- to experiment, to improvise, to rethink. Those who did so have been making an enormous contribution to Western civilization, as recently as Nabokov's Lolita. Then came Bolshevism. For a few years the avant-garde seemed enthroned, even while religious impulses were being transmuted in the mystique of the Revolution. Both these cultural streams were dammed up by Stalin, and remain largely throttled still. The result is a profound discontinuity in Russian culture, a discontinuity caused solely by political suppression. (In the "controversial" poetry of Pasternak, Akhmatova, Tsevetayeva and others, one finds experimental forms infused with religious content; it is the official-Communist culture that lacks roots in the past and branches to the present.) The interesting question is which stream, the Orthodox or the experimental, will break through first. Both Stalin and Khrushchev, as good peasants' sons, have tended to treat Orthodoxy a bit more tolerantly: the icons have been preserved, the churches restored as tourist attractions or "anti-religious" museums. Yet the potential threat it poses to the ideological basis of the regime is, I think, perhaps greater in the long run than that of experimental art, which could rather easily be tolerated (viz. Poland and Yugoslavia). "They have thrown down Stalin, they have thrown down God, what can we believe?" an engineer in Leningrad asked me. A culture in which the towering figures remain Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky provides a rather specific set of answers. Historical logic seems against it, but my own strong feeling while there was that religion has a future in Russia.

Nationalism: One reason I believe Orthodoxy has a future is that, in Russia as in other Eastern nations, it has been inextricably linked with nationalism. And Russian nationalism has been one

of the principal, if not the principal, props of the regime at least since 1941 -- both in its positive (win the war, reach the moon) and its negative (beat the Jews, jam the broadcasts) aspects. I was continually struck by the extent to which the regime (which, it may be remembered, is a product of the so-called "Zimmerwald Left" in European socialism) justifies itself and its policies in nationalist terms. The adjective with which the party likes to describe itself these days is rodnaya, literally "own" or "native," actually much more emotional in color (derived from the verb "to be born," as is the noun rodina, "motherland"). Of all the adjectives that Lenin might conceivably have applied to his party, this one is probably the least congenial to the entire cast of his thought. One wonders also how he might react to the various statues and memorials to the Tsars one sees all about. Some are quite justifiable as works of art, such as the "Bronze Horseman" or the witty monument to Catharine the Great and her lovers (also in Leningrad). Yet one wonders if Lenin would ever have made his revolution had he known that, half a century later and in the city bearing his name, one of the principal squares remains dominated by an equestrian statue of the very paragon of absolutism, Nicholas I, while there is not a single visible sign of Trotsky, Bukharin, Zinoviev or (for that matter) Stalin?



MONUMENT TO CATHERINE II

But nationalism is not merely a "gimmick" fostered by the regime because of the patent bankruptcy of its own ideology. It seems, rather, to be a quite deep-seated popular sentiment which the regime both feeds and attempts to capture. (Dr. Johnson's remark on patriotism is apposite here.) Three aspects of that sentiment seem worthy of note.

First, the war: One cannot talk to any Russian for more than five minutes without hearing about the devastation of World War II, which along with Stalin's incapacities is blamed for all Russia's current troubles. One also gets the impression (carefully fostered by the party) that practically no-one else did any serious fighting during the war, and that no other people -- not even the Poles or Yugoslavs -- suffered half as much as the Russians. The Germans? Yes; but their economic recovery is explained by "billions" in Allied aid. (The fear of the Germans is quite genuine, but it struck me as a fear not so much of Nazi sadism as of historic German efficiency and power; be

it remembered that Germany defeated Russia in the first war, despite the Western Front.) All in all, Russians of all kinds talk about the war with the same sort of immediacy as Western Europeans did ten years ago. Part of this may be explained by economic conditions; but there is also, I think, in the Russian mind today a sort of blurring between the end of the war and the death of Stalin eight years later. "The war," as a girl in Volgograd put it, "swept many bad things away," conveniently forgetting Zhdanovism, the Leningrad case, the doctors' plot, etc. The confusion is, obviously, between what the Russians wanted to happen in 1945 and what actually happened only after 1953, or 1956. Thus, psychologically (as well as materially), Russia is still in an early post-war period, with all the nationalist as well as other insecurities that implies.

Second, the great-power complex: Because of the prolonged bi-polarity of the cold war, most Russians I talked to considered the Soviet Union and the United States the only countries worth talking about, in any context. (The few exceptions were rather older men whose education had for one reason or another steeped them in French or German culture.) The suggestion that both the United States and Russia might learn some useful things from the Italians, the French, the Swedes, was politely but incredulously brushed aside. The idea that, before trying to catch up with the United States, Russia should attempt to catch up with Yugoslavia, was flatly dismissed. If there was a supreme lack of interest (and knowledge) about most of Europe (Germany excepted), I also found practically no concern about China, mostly amusement. In Moscow the story was that its famous Peking Restaurant would soon be renamed the Havana. In Leningrad, the tale is told of a Chinese party meeting with a two-point agenda: home construction, and building Communism. Punch line: "Since we have no nails or hammers, let's proceed to the second question." The idea generally is that the Chinese just don't matter.

Third, the intellectuals: It is frequently assumed, because Stalin warred on modern literature under the banner of "anti-cosmo-politanism," that the rebellious writers are all, indeed, cosmopoli-tan and internationalist in their disposition. One may, perhaps, make this assumption about such figures as Nekrasov or Ehrenburg, but to generalize in such matters is to oversimplify. It is one thing to wish to see the world (Yevtushenko) or adopt "Western" art-istic forms (the sculptor Neizvestny); it is quite another to be genuinely cosmopolitan in outlook as Turgenev was, free both of Russian chauvinism and (perhaps worse, because more sincere) Russian patriotic-sentimentalism. Both these outlooks cast a long shadow on the Russian culture of the last century, so that many of the stories of Pushkin and Lermontov seem both more modern and more cosmopolitan than most of the work nearer our own time. There is a case to be made for the notion that, above all things, the October Revolution was an elemental repudiation by peasant, traditional Russia of the entire Francophile culture centered in and symbolized by St. Peters-burg.

Such notions remain germane, as two recent items from the So-viet press will illustrate. One is a review in the August Novi Mir,

partially rescuing from the limbo of "un-persons" several talented Russian writers of the Twenties, among them Boris Pilnyak. Rehabilitation is always to the good, of course, and particularly in this case not only because of Pilnyak's talent but because he perished after suggesting in a novel that Stalin contrived the surgical murder of Defense Minister Frunze. And yet, the Novi Mir critic points out (quite correctly, I think) that Pilnyak was given to sentimentalize the "leather jackets" of the Bolshevik Cheka as the incarnation of that primordial, primitive "Rus" which was sweeping away old (Western) ideas of life and forms of culture. One may wish Pilnyak to be read and discussed freely, one may note with irony the stolid conservatism of today's Soviet ruling group, but I do not believe one should go so far as to commend these sentiments of Pilnyak (or similar ones of Mayakovsky and others) as our idea of a healthy Russian culture of the future.

The second item is even more to the point -- a long poem written by Andrei Voznesensky for the magazine Yunost and liberally extracted by Pravda a fortnight ago. The poem marks the return to grace of this young poet, considered by the "liberals" and their Western sympathizers as Russia's most talented, and severely chastised by Khrushchev at last spring's crack-down meetings. In the circumstances, it is quite understandable that Voznesensky should choose as his subject a political school run by Lenin in emigration on the outskirts of Paris, and indulge himself in the obligatory deification of Lenin's memory (all things to all men in Russia these days, in any case). One may applaud Voznesensky's continued freedom in form and even, here and there, a few "subversive" ideas. Yet what bothers me about this poem -- from a writer considered the most elegant and subtle of the young Russians -- is that same old strain of Russian patriotic-sentimentalism ("Beloved Russia... I am sick when you are sick," etc.). It was precisely this emotion which doomed the entire Russian movement known as Narodnichestvo (Populism), from Herzen to the Socialist Revolutionaries of 1918; and it was precisely this emotion of which Lenin, above all others, was free; at least a partial explanation of his success.

It is too much to expect that poets all be tough-minded (though Shakespeare furnishes a model), yet those of us interested in the politics of literature should be careful to make distinctions. It seems to me one of the most remarkable merits of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's stories that he is completely free of just this patriotic-sentimentalizing.

Stale Air, Fresh Winds. One must live in Russia a while to realize just how stale, soporific, even fetid is the cultural atmosphere (I am speaking of culture in the broadest sense, including everything from newspapers to shop-window decorations). And yet, if one stays a while longer, one also realizes, first, that a large body of Russians -- particularly young Russians -- feel equally stifled; and second, more important, they seek every opportunity to "vote with their feet" against the official tedium. Every fresh breeze, no matter where it originates, is anxiously quaffed by a people gasping for spiritual oxygen.

To begin with newspapers, which in Russia generally peddle slogans and "campaigns" rather than news. It is quite easy to feel,

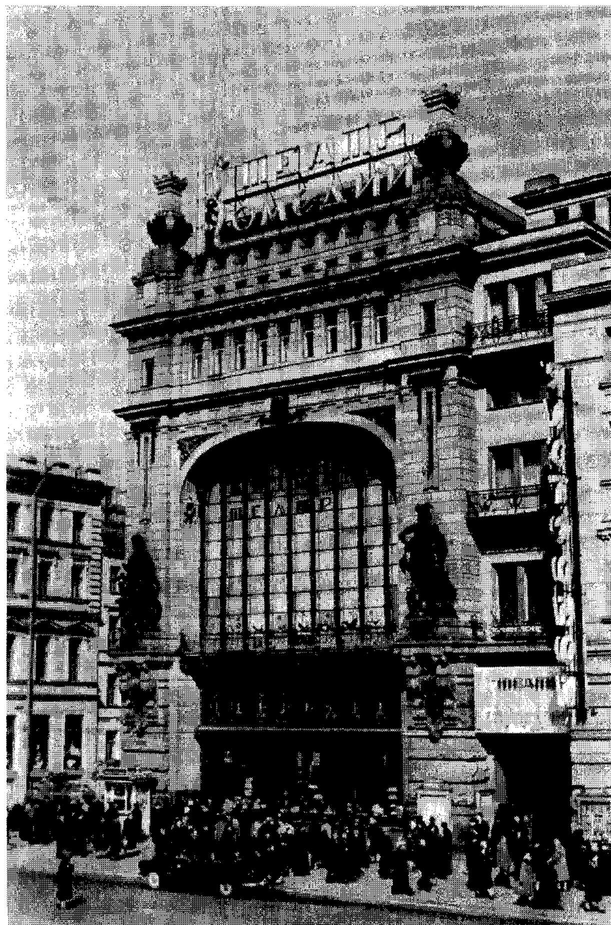
after a few days in the Soviet Union, completely cut off from the world. Pravda will tell you that Harold Macmillan has resigned, but in an item so short one hasn't the faintest notion of the climate in the Tory party; it will tell you that Moroccan reactionaries and Berber counter-revolutionaries are bothering the Algerian people's hero Ben Bella, but it is impossible to figure out how seriously they are bothering him; it will tell you one day that Tito is in South America, and then forget him for a fortnight, and so on. What you will learn is that chemical workers and managers from all corners of the Soviet Union, led by heroic far-seeing Communists, are rallying to produce enough fertilizer to reach the stars; and also -- if you resisted the impulse to skip the long Khrushchev speech launching this campaign -- that Russia is buying grain from the United States.

Russian reading-between-the-lines is an old story, but there are several interesting new wrinkles on the tale of how the Soviet people manage to get some idea of the world. First, Izvestia seems to be the most fashionable daily now, precisely because its foreign news items are more substantial and its domestic reporters a bit freer (thanks probably to editor Adzhubei's position as Khrushchev's son-in-law) to actually go out and report. Next, a substantial number of rather ordinary Russians go out of their way to get two periodicals founded in recent years mostly for the edification of the governing strata; these are Za Rubezhom, sponsored by the Journalists' Union, which prints important speeches and statements by Kennedy, Nehru, etc.; and Inostranaya Literatura, which reprints an impressive number of Western contemporary writers. And finally -- most surprising to me -- hundreds if not thousands of Russians, in Moscow and Leningrad at least, queue up daily to buy the Western Communist press: L'Humanité, L'Unita, the London and New York Workers and now the Yugoslav Politika and Borba. The two Workers aren't much better than Izvestia, but after a week or so in the Soviet Union L'Humanité, for example, both in its news columns and its advertisements (department stores, automobiles, etc.), seems like one of the world's great newspapers. One can imagine the effects if the Kremlin could ever be induced to permit even a few hundred copies of Le Monde or the Guardian.

Radio Moscow, too, is one of the world's great bores. Its news, commentary and discussion are both tendentious and monotonous (although inveterate listeners tell me it has become much more slick and professional than it used to be); the musical programs dominated by snatches of nineteenth-century classics (baroque has caught on only with the more sophisticated concert managers) and folk-song recitals from the national republics, also rather nineteenth-century in tone. Whole hours may be consumed with the reading of a Pravda editorial on contemporary dogmatists and sectarians, or reports by Byelorussian party officials on plan fulfilment as viewed from Minsk. Is it surprising that millions of Russians turn the dial to the Voice of America, BBC, Radio Monte Carlo, even Vatican Radio -- and not merely for news but also, perhaps even primarily, for music? The most ridiculous conversations I had in Russia were on this score: in Leningrad, two young men would not let me go until I had reassured them that Ray Anthony was still being properly appreciated by Americans: and in Moscow I brought relief to a considerably larger group by spiking the current rumor that Paul Anka (beloved by all but myself) had been killed in a sports-car crash. It is difficult to ima-

gine the impact on Russians of even the slightest Western culture-fact. One consequence of Cuban-Soviet friendship, for example, has been the legitimation of Latin-American dance rhythms; one cannot hear them (yet?) on Radio Moscow or in the smaller cities, but in one Leningrad hotel I saw a clapping, shouting crowd of dancers compel the band to repeat a samba three times. (A little earlier it had demanded two encores of what I believe was the Glenn Miller arrangement of "One O'clock Jump.")

The same patterns of selection operate in almost every cultural field. My first theatrical evening in Moscow, for example, was spent at the Moscow Art -- an immense disappointment in view of what I had heard about this theater thirty or forty years ago. Not only was Mary Stuart, 44 in the drama (by Schiller), played by an actress who (complaining neighbors informed me) was "at least 69"; but the entire acting style was stylized, wooden, declamatory -- in short, the very opposite of the New York "method" supposedly based on Stanislavsky. Within a few days, however, I had learned the Muscovite verdict on this theater: "Hopeless, run by the same old fogeys for years." In Moscow, I was told, the only theater really worth looking at was the _Savremenni_ (Contemporary); whereas in Leningrad "one goes" to the _Comedy Theater_ or, on occasion, the Gorky Drama Theater. I managed to get to the Leningrad Comedy Theater just before it turned its premises over to a touring Rumanian company; and I can well understand my informants' taste, for it (_Don Juan_ in this case) was brilliant and contemporary in almost every sense. Its guiding light (producer-director-set designer), N. P. Akimov, was removed by Stalin in 1949 (Jewish wife) but restored to his post in 1955, to the delight of almost all literate Leningraders. "You understand," a young engineer told me, "he is an old intellectual (_stari intelligent_), a cultured man of the old Petersburg type." He is, indeed (simply judging by the production), and his theater -- though a fire-trap, like the _Savremenni_ in Moscow -- consistently packs them in, again like the _Savremenni_. Not long before leaving Russia, I was amused to read a rather stuffy article in one of the papers complaining about the fact that it is almost impossible to get tickets for the _Savremenni_, while the Moscow Art and a half-dozen other "leading" theaters are usually a third empty; the article chose to pretend it was simply a matter of faulty "distribution arrangements."



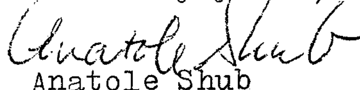
COMEDY THEATER, LENINGRAD

And so it goes: In Moscow's Pushkin Museum and Leningrad's Hermitage the crowds drift to the French impressionists; and _Izvestia_ is forced to complain that an American graphic-arts exhibition, playing to turnaway crowds in far-off Alma Ata, is "ideological subversion." It is.

Generations. Everything that has been written about the Soviet conflict of generations is true, and I doubt if anything else can possibly trouble the leadership quite as much. For the foreign visitor, the oldest generation (55 and over) is of some interest, the links to the pre-revolutionary and emigre Russians we all know being quite clear. The middle generation (roughly 35 to 55) seems for the most part hopeless -- sullen, beaten or, at the very least, reserved; one can talk to those people, but you must do the approaching, and there is an unmistakeable air of great spiritual (and physical) fatigue. But the Russian youth are a kind of miracle: vivid, alert, curious, open-minded, friendly, and almost completely uncontaminated by the heritage of Stalinist cynicism. I do not think they take the political or cultural pretensions of the current leadership at all seriously; and yet -- unlike Western or even Polish and Yugoslav youth -- they are not at all "apolitical." What they sense, above all, is the backwardness of the system under which they live; it was from Moscow and Leningrad students that I heard, a hundred times, as the supreme compliment, the word "_savremenni_" (contemporary), and it was applied not only to theaters or technology, but to economic, social and political practice as well. They are quite well educated (many in special schools in which the language of instruction is English, French or German) and, all things considered, remarkably well attuned to what is going on in the West. (One should qualify this by saying that, while they often do not know the specific facts, their instincts are accurate.) In short, the very newest "Soviet man" turns out to be remarkably like those idealistic generations of young Russians who were -- not so slowly -- leading their people to freedom and Europe before the catastrophe of World War I. ("Cursed by the year Fourteen!" cries a famous Russian poem.)

In fact, if I have two over-all impressions of the Russian spirit today to communicate -- before turning in the next letter to material conditions -- they are these: First, Russia strikes one as a convalescent, a patient long ravaged by a deep and serious illness, inherently strong but still in delicate condition, and just beginning now to recover. Second, a compelling historical analogy: If the libertarian Kronstadt rebels of 1921 are the Decembrists of our century, we are now (having had an absolutist Tsar, a disappointing _half_-reforming one, and unsuccessful conflict with the West) roughly in the 1860's, a time when young men began to question and re-think the entire basis of Russian society. One certainly senses those beginnings today. The next step, if analogies have any validity, is for someone to write _What Is To Be Done_.

Cordially yours,



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