

John Steinbeck ((1902–1968)

A Russian Journal

CHAPTER 9

Moscow WAS IN A STATE of feverish activity. Great gangs of men were covering the buildings with gigantic posters and portraits of the national heroes, acres in extent. The bridges were strung with electric light globes. The walls of the Kremlin and its towers, and even its battlements, were outlined in electric lights. Every public building was floodlighted. In every public square dance stands had been put up, and in some of the squares little booths, made to look like Russian fairy-tale houses, had been erected for the sale of sweets, and ice-cream, and souvenirs. A special little dangling metal buttonhole ornament was official, and everyone wore one of them. Delegations from many countries were arriving almost hourly. The busses and trains were loaded. The roads were full of people coming into the city, carrying not only their clothes, but food for several days. They have been hungry so often that they take no chances when they move, and everyone carries a few loaves of bread. Bunting and flags and paper flowers were on every building. The individual commissariats had their signs on the buildings housing their offices. The subway trust put up a huge map of the subways of Moscow, and at the bottom a little subway train that ran back and forth. This attracted crowds, who stared at it all day and late into the night. Wagons and trucks loaded with foodstuffs, with cabbages, with melons, with tomatoes, with cucumbers, rolled into the city—the gifts of the collective farms to the city on its eight-hundredth anniversary.

Everyone in the street wore some medal, or ribbon, or decoration reminiscent of the war. The city boiled with activity.

I went over to the Herald Tribune office and found a note from Sweet Joe Newman. He was held up in Stockholm, and he asked me to cover the party for the Herald Tribune, since he couldn't get back to do it.

Capa was working feverishly over his films, criticizing his work himself, the quality of the developing, everything. He had an enormous number of negatives by now, and he spent hours in front of the window, looking through the negatives, and bitching badly. Nothing was correct, nothing was right.

We called Mr. Karaganov at the Voks office and asked him to find out exactly what we had to do to get the films out of Russia. We thought there might be some censorship, and we wanted to know what it was enough in advance so that we could make preparations for it. He assured us that he would go to work on it immediately and would let us know.

On the night before the celebration we were invited to the Bol-shoi Theater, but we weren't told what it would be. By some fortunate accident we were unable to go. We heard later that it was six hours of speeches, and no one could leave, for there were members of the government in the government box. It was one of the happiest accidents that ever happened to us.

The restaurants and cabarets were packed with people, and many of them were set aside for the delegates who had come from the other republics of the Soviet Union and from other countries, so that we couldn't get in at all. As a matter of fact it was very difficult to get dinner that night. The city was simply mobbed with people, and they walked slowly about the streets, stopping in one square to listen for a while to the music, and then trudging on to another square. They looked, and trugged, and looked. The country people were wide-eyed. Some of them had never seen the city before, and no one had ever seen the city so lighted up. There was some dancing in the squares, but not a great deal. Mostly the people trugged and stared, and trugged on and stared at something else. The museums were so packed that you couldn't get in at all. The theaters were mobbed. There was no building on

which there was not at least one huge picture of Stalin, and the picture second in size was that of Molotov. Then there were huge portraits of the presidents of the different republics, and of the other heroes of the Soviet Union, their size graduated down.

Late in the evening we went to a little party at the house of an American Moscow correspondent who has been in Russia for many years. He speaks and reads Russian easily, and he told us a great many stories about some of the difficulties of running a house in present-day Russia. And just as with hotel serving, most of the difficulties came from the inefficiency of a bureaucratic system—so many records and so much bookkeeping made it almost impossible to get any repairs done.

After dinner he took a book from his shelves. "I want you to listen to this," he said, and began reading slowly, translating from Russian. And he read something like this—this is not an exact transcription, but it is close enough.

"The Russians of Moscow are highly suspicious of foreigners, who are watched constantly by the secret police. Every move is noticed and sent into central headquarters. A guard is placed on all foreigners. Furthermore, Russians do not receive foreigners in their houses, and they seem to be afraid even to talk to them very much. A message sent to a member of the government usually remains unanswered, and a further message is also unanswered. If one is importunate, one is told that this official has left the city or is sick. Foreigners are permitted to travel in Russia only after great difficulty, and during their travels they are very closely watched. Because of this general coldness and suspicion, foreigners visiting in Moscow are forced to associate with each other exclusively."

There was a good deal more in this vein, and at the end our friend looked up and said, "What do you think of it?"

And we said, "We don't think you can get it past the censor."

He laughed. "But this was written in 1634. It is from a book called *Voyages in Muscovy, Tartary and Persia*, by a man named Adam Olearius." And he said, "Would you like to hear an account of the Moscow conference?"

And he read from another book something like this: "Diplomatically the Russians are very difficult to get along with. If one submits a plan, they counter it with another plan. Their diplomats are not trained in the large world, but are mostly people who have never left Russia. Indeed, a Russian who has lived in France is considered a Frenchman; one who has lived in Germany is considered a German, and these are not trusted at home.

"The Russians cannot go diplomatically in a straight line. They never get to the point, they argue in circles. Words are picked up, and bandied, and tossed, until in the end a general confusion is the result of any conference."

After a pause he said, "And that was written in 1661 by a French diplomat, Augustin, Baron de Mayerburg. These things make one much less restless under the present setup. I don't think Russia has changed very much in some respects. Ambassadors and diplomats from foreign countries have been going crazy here for six hundred years."