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MOSCOW — A LIVING OR A DEAD CITY?¹

Abstract

The author is interested in travels of writers and journalists (from Poland and the world) to the USSR in the beginning of the 1930s. Some of the travellers visited the state seeking to be reassured in their negative opinion. Others, in contrast, went there convinced that they travelled to a country of universal social justice. However, they did not realise to what an extent the programme of their visit depended on the Soviet propaganda machine. The combined reading of texts by Antoni Słonimski, Andre Gide, Melchior Wańkiewicz and Bernard Shaw shows the USSR as a country whose directions of development are difficult to foresee.

Keywords

travels, reportage, documentary prose, intellectuals, poputchiks, propaganda, totalitarianism, aquatic metaphor.

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Having spent two months in Moscow Walter Benjamin wrote: “For someone who has arrived from Moscow, Berlin is a dead city. The people on the street seem desperately isolated, each one at a great distance from the next, all alone in the midst of a broad stretch of street. [...] What is true of the image of the city and its inhabitants is also applicable to its mentality: the new perspective one gains on this is the most indisputable consequence of a stay in Russia”². After him the USSR was visited by other journalists, writers, intellectuals. It is worth seeing what impressions of Moscow, the capital of a completely new State, they took home.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

In 1887 Karl Marx wrote that it was believed that the creation of Christian myths was possible only because print had not been invented. Quite the contrary: “Everyday press and the telegraph, which carries its revelations all over the globe in the blink of an eye, fabricate more myths [...] in a day that could have been created in a century”. At the beginning of the 1930s Aleksander Wat thought likewise when in the “Miesięcznik Literacki” [Literary Monthly], co-edited by him, he emphasized that “The purely political reportage is mostly false” and he gave examples of many such texts, which he called defamatory about the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics³. Today it is difficult to responsibly name the texts which the author of “Ciemne światło” [The dark light] thought about⁴. It is not difficult, however, to notice the reasons for his and other futurists’ sympathy for the USSR and understand the anxiety that unfavourable information about the USSR, e.g. about the role of the labour camps, reaching western countries and Poland, could evoke.

Stalin was not interested in the government of souls by European and American proletarians or artists but also in more measurable things, e.g.

² W. Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, R. Sieburth (transl.), Cambridge–Harvard 1986, p. 13, 14. See: E.W. Clowes, *Russia’s Deconstructionist Westernizer: Mikhail Ryklin between Moscow and Berlin*, Landshaft 1, 2008.

³ A. Wat, *Reportaż jako rodzaj literacki*, *Miesięcznik Literacki* 7, 1930, p. 332. On the intellectuals’ infatuation with the revolution and its benefits see: M. Ryklin, *Kommunizm jak religija. Intellektuały i oktiabrskaja rewolucja*, Moskwa 2009.

⁴ Perhaps reflections and memoirs of Panait Istrati on his stay in the USSR prepared for print by the editorial board and published in “*Wiadomości Literackie*” (see: Panait Istrati o Rosji sowieckiej. *Sprawa Rusakowa*, *Wiadomości Literackie* 10, 1930) or a collection of reportages by S. Cat-Mackiewicz published in *Myśl w obcęgach*. *Studia nad psychologią społeczeństwa Sowietów*, Poznań 1932.

trade with countries which were legally prohibited from buying goods manufactured in a forced or slave labour system. At the turn of the 1920s, Russia's number one export product was wood sold at dumping prices, acquired on a mass scale by unqualified but free labour, i.e. the prisoners of the gulags. Perhaps for this reason: "No group promoted cooperation with Soviet Russia more persistently than the European and American business"⁵, as was noted by Richard Pipes.

HOW IS A WORD ABOUT MOSCOW MADE?

It was important for the Soviet Union that negative information about it was never published. The "internal marketing" was in the hands of the Main Administration for the Protection of State Secrets in the Press (Glavlit). "Glavlit controlled everything — writes Frank Westermann — [...] the text on swimming cards, decorative motifs on handkerchiefs, coffee mill user instructions and also who publishes what and on what topic in the Soviet Union. It withdrew from libraries all the books which were no longer consistent with the current policy of the party. For some time, it printed separate, carefully prepared, editions of the «Pravda», for the sick Maxim Gorky"⁶.

Glavlit also controlled foreign correspondents. Malcolm Muggeridge, a correspondent in Moscow in the 1930s, felt like a student when he had to face the Glavlit clerks. He wrote: "you took [the article] to the censors like you submitted a paper for assessment by a Cambridge professor, with anxiety and fear that the red pencil would delete something"⁷.

As regards writers or journalists who lived outside the territory of the Soviet Union, whom the Glavlit could not control, methods tested by Peter the Great and Catherine II with respect to Voltaire and Diderot were applied. Not only people who could be called fellow-travellers after Trotsky or "useful idiots" after Lenin were invited to the USSR but also people who could speak and write well about the USSR after the return to their home countries⁸.

⁵ R. Pipes, *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime*, New York 1995, p. 215. Quoted after: D. Tołczyk, *Gułag w oczach zachodu*, Warszawa 2009, p. 75.

⁶ F. Westerman, *Inżynierowie dusz*, S. Paszkiet (transl.), Warszawa 2007, p. 129.

⁷ M. Muggeridge, *Chronicles of Wasted Time: The Green Stick*, New York 1973, p. 223. Quoted after: D. Tołczyk, *Gułag w oczach zachodu*, p. 78.

⁸ D. Tołczyk, *Gułag w oczach zachodu*, p. 66; *Głazami innostrancew. Inostrannyje pisateli o Sowietkom Sojuzie*, M. Żywow (ed.), Moskwa 1932; see: T.B. Balszowa, *Pisma iz Sowietkogo*

TRIPS TO THE USSR

At the beginning of the 1930s, European and American travel agencies in their brochures advertised familiarization with the “Soviet presence”. Apart from a trip on the White Sea — Baltic Sea Canal, they tempted prospective tourists with visits to Soviet prisons. They must have been well prepared since Bernard Shaw could write: “In England criminals enter the prison as ordinary men and leave it as «criminals», while in Russia they enter it [...] as criminals and would have left it as ordinary men had it not been so difficult to convince them that it was time to leave the prison”⁹.

Writers and journalists used to go to Moscow in organized tours since the very beginning of the 1930s. A trip organized by the Polish Institute of Art Propaganda featured a visit to the theatre, an anti-religion museum, a hospital, a court room during a trial, as well as a visit paid to a Polish leftist writer or journalist living in Moscow at the time — Karol Radek, Ryszard Stande, Bruno Jasiński. A similar route was later followed by writers, who visited Moscow on their own — Antoni Słonimski, Aleksander Janta-Pończyński, André Gide.

People from the west were travelling to the Soviet Republic like to Mecca or for a long awaited holiday. Muggeridge describes these “pilgrimages” in the following way: “They went to the Soviet Union in a festive mood like sports fans going to a match, equipped with rattles and colour scarves. Everybody had some hope — to see Stalin in person or to have an affair with a black haired *komsomolka* in a red scarf round her neck who first of all had unhindered and modern views on sex”¹⁰. Antoni Słonimski, describing his trip to Moscow in the “Wiadomości Literackie” [Literary News] wrote that he met a group of American workers on the train who scrimped and saved to come to see the country of proletarian dictatorship and a group with a few wealthy industrialists. “...they seemed to be proud of their courage”, wrote the author of “Bitwa nad Bzdurą” [The Battle of Rubbish]¹¹.

Sojuza w paryżskom archiwie Romena Rołłana, [in:] Romen Rołłan, 1866–1966. Po materiałam jubilejnoj siessii, Moskwa 1968.

⁹ G.B. Shaw, *The Rationalization of Russia*, Bloomington 1964, p. 94. Quoted after: D. Tołczyk, *Gułag w oczach zachodu* p. 137.

¹⁰M. Muggeridge, *Chronicles of Wasted Time: The Green Stick*, p. 212–213. Quoted after: D. Tołczyk, *Gułag w oczach zachodu*, p. 131–132.

¹¹A. Słonimski, *Moja Podróż do Rosji*, Warszawa 1997, p. 9.

IN A NEW BETTER WORLD

At the beginning of the 1930s, an average inhabitant of the western world that was plunged into crisis could not only be bewildered with the economic boom seen in every place in Moscow, which suggested that the USSR enjoyed continuous economic growth and that it was never affected by any crisis, but also by the fact that the country to which they came had completely done away with most moral and legal principles which were the basis of the bourgeois-capitalist world. The state, which had existed for several years only, could be treated as a paradise, made up and arranged by futurists and liberals. The attitude to these rights and customs revealed the differences in the outlook on the part of visitors to the Soviet Union. The problem of divorce, broadly discussed in the USA, Europe and also in Poland, was solved in a very simple way. The Soviet state permitted divorces without any restrictions. Divorces, like marriages, required only a few simple administrative steps. Antoni Słonimski, who examined the problem, wrote: “With my own watch in my hand I counted how long it takes to get married and how long it takes to get divorced in the Soviet Union. [...] Some young man with a cold in a leather jacket got divorced in two minutes fifteen. This guy admitted to have been married four times, last time two months ago”. The sarcasm in Słonimski’s words and the tone of a sports commentary reveal that he was not pleased with this at all. Other “anti-bourgeois” solutions aroused much greater controversies in visitors to the USSR. For Halina Lenczewska-Bormanowa it was the attitude of the proletarian world to homosexuality, which was a sign of the most demanding test of tolerance. “In Moscow — she wrote — they are not afraid of homosexuality. This deviation is believed to be curable and the encouragement of homosexuality is punished with imprisonment of up to six years”. She wrote similarly about abortion: it “is practiced although not recommended”. These problems were perceived completely differently by André Gide. He was appalled by the attitude to homosexuality, for obvious reasons in the first place. And secondly, since he visited the Soviet Union after the amendment of the Soviet criminal law into which anti-abortion provisions were incorporated, which considerably restricted permitted abortion, Gide indicated the irrationality of the Soviet authorities and criticizes them in the spirit of eugenic ideas. He noticed that the new provisions led to 10,000 (65%) more births each month for which the hospitals in the Soviet capital were not prepared¹².

¹² A. Gide, *Powrót z ZSRR*, J.E. Skiński (transl.), Warszawa 1937, p. 51.

Visitors to the Soviet Union could hardly come to terms with religious matters. The fact that Orthodox churches were closed and turned into warehouses, stores and clubs and that the clergy were deprived of the possibility of religious practices, i.e. income, was proof for Stanisław Cat-Mackiewicz of the ultimate fall of culture in the East¹³ and for Bernard Shaw it was a package of rational decisions, which he voiced to duplicate in England¹⁴.

And another example, which emphasizes the differences between Poles and the citizens of other countries visiting the USSR, indicating the inability of reducing the consequences of centuries-old Polish-Russian conflicts, and the colonial complex of the inhabitants of Western Europe and the USA. Polish journalists visiting the USSR perceived representatives of non-European nations in the streets of Moscow as “wild animals, only partly humanized”, members of “some wild human tribes”¹⁵. Cat-Mackiewicz summed up their appearance as follows: “All of them were manikins, whom Zagłoba would surely have smoked and hanged in the parish church in Łowicz as a votive offering — yellow, slant-eyed, with pouting lips, square heads and bandy legs”¹⁶. For the majority (not all) Polish readers their presence in the capital of the Bolshevik state clearly indicated Mongol or Tartar influence exerted upon Moscow for hundreds of years, and testified to the cultural superiority of Poles. Thanks to this Poland could believe it was the bulwark of a Christian and civilized Europe. On the other hand, most of Western journalists believed that the cultural expansion of Russians is the mission of civilization (cf. Barbara Thompson)¹⁷. Probably only Cat-Mackiewicz believed it was the uncompromising practice of colonization. “Nobody would be such loyal slaves to the empire but the inhabitants of yurts whom Moscow had educated and subsequently, well equipped, sent back home to hammer communism”, he wrote¹⁸. He perceived the mechanisms of the emancipation of women in a similar way.

¹³S. Cat-Mackiewicz, *Myśl w obcęgach*. Studia nad psychologią społeczeństwa Sowietów, Poznań 1990, p. 15.

¹⁴See G.B. Shaw’s article “Pan Jessipow się gorszy” published in *Miesięcznik Literacki* 7, 1930, signed by G.B. Jessipow.

¹⁵M. Wańkowicz, *Opierzona rewolucja*, Warszawa 1934, p. 61, 125.

¹⁶S. Cat-Mackiewicz, *Myśl w obcęgach*, p. 25–26.

¹⁷E. M. Thompson, *Trubadurzy imperium*. Literatura rosyjska i kolonializm, przeł. Anna Sierszulska, Kraków 2000.

¹⁸S. Cat-Mackiewicz, *Myśl w obcęgach*, p. 50–51.

These examples, which could be multiplied indefinitely, only prove that in the 1920s and 1930s (and later as well) there was no single interpretation community in Europe, which is frequently referred to by Ewa Thompson with respect to the USA.

Accounts of visits to Moscow by Polish and European writers are probably the few cases in which the poetry of journalistic accounts is completely dependent on the time-table of the travel agency providing services to foreigners and the agents of the Soviet State Political Directorate (GPU) and the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD). The most insightful ones often did not realize that they participated in a series of shows similar to those which were staged in 1787 by Prince Grigory Potemkin for Empress Catherine and Austria's Emperor Joseph II. Even Mieczysław Bohdan Lepecki, Marshal Pilsudski's adjutant, an experienced officer, who was enchanted with his partly official trip to the USSR in 1936, not always associated the refined meals prepared for him in the restaurants and impeccably clean hotel rooms with NKVD agents, who accompanied him on his trip. "Ordinary tourists" and intellectuals trustful in their intuition and perspicacity were often convinced that they could not be deluded by any shows since the ultimate truth about life in the USSR would be told them by an "ordinary man".

A WORD ABOUT METAPHORS

However, it was difficult to come across "an ordinary man" in Moscow, and in any other large city¹⁹. Instead, travellers saw the omnipresent crowd composed of people whose individual features could hardly be noticed. All of them "were dressed in grey, faded and worn out clothes. The colour of their clothes blended with the pavement and trodden snow in the streets", wrote Zygmunt Nowakowski²⁰. André Gide perceived them in a similar way. He wrote: "There is an exceptional uniformity in [their] clothes, probably also in their minds. If only one could see them. This is proof for the «equalization of classes»"²¹. Halina Lenczewska-Bormanowa, the author of the book "USSR in the eyes of a woman",

¹⁹See: G. Simmel: *Mentalność mieszkańców wielkich miast*, M. Łukasiewicz (transl.), [in:] *Socjologia*, Warszawa 1975.

²⁰Z. Nowakowski, *W pogoni za formą. Wrażenia z pobytu w Moskwie, Lwów 1934*, p. 28.

²¹A. Gide, *Powrót z ZSRR*, p. 28. Soviet society is described similarly by K. Irzykowski, *Rosja się rozżarza*, *Europa stygnie*, *Wiadomości Literackie* 5, 1932.

felt helpless in such a crowd. She noticed: “The crowd is strangely homogenous. Everybody is identical. How do they pair up? How do they know that it is him or that it is her when everybody is alike?”²². These observations follow the European reflection on the role of the masses and crowds in social life. Suffice it to give two names — Gustave Le Bon and José Ortega y Gasset and the names of Polish thinkers who were interested in the problem of a mass society seen in the context of bolshevism, i.e. Florian Znaniecki and Marian Zdziechowski²³. A crowd, being non-measurable, shapeless and uniform, reminded travellers of liquid. Słonimski wrote about “crowds of people”, who “flock to the streets”²⁴. Wańkiewicz depicted a “grey human liquid” flowing along the pavements²⁵. Lenczewska-Bormanowa spoke of a crowd, which “flows through the street”, but she also saw a “sun-soaked red square, melted asphalt and purple houses surrounding it”. Despite this, travellers were not afraid of contacting such crowds, at least seemingly. “I plunge into the crowd, take a bath in humanity”, said André Gide²⁶.

The metaphor of liquid or water which almost everybody visiting Moscow brings to mind refers us to an array of contexts. The futurist Tytus Czyżewski began his poem entitled “Melodia tłumu” [The melody of the crowd] with it — “A river flows in a boulevard”²⁷. This river is, obviously, a non-individualized human crowd.

Zygmunt Bauman uses the metaphor of liquid when he writes about modern societies and post-modern societies threatened with contact with people existing on the side, the contact with whom can make you dirty, make man experience the unpleasant feeling of besmirching or stickiness. The authors of accounts from Moscow are also aware of such qualities of the liquid, although most of them do not articulate them directly. Perhaps some kind of political correctness is the obstacle. Writers do not write anything directly but all the time emphasize their ambivalent relation to the crowd they observe. Liquid can make one dirty and evoke the feeling of stickiness and therefore whenever they describe that feeling

²²H. Lenczewska-Bormanowa, *ZSSR w oczach kobiety*, Warszawa 1936, p. 18.

²³See: M. Kornat, *Bolszewizm. Totalitaryzm. Rewolucja. Rosja. Początki sowietologii i studiów nad systemami totalitarnymi w Polsce (1918–1939)*, Kraków 2007, p. 19–24.

²⁴A. Słonimski, *Moja podróż do Rosji*, p. 11.

²⁵M. Wańkiewicz, *Opierzona rewolucja*, p. 41.

²⁶A. Gide, *Powrót z ZSRR*, p. 29.

²⁷T. Czyżewski, *Melodia tłumu*, [in:] H. Zaworska (ed.), *Antologia polskiego futuryzmu i nowej sztuki*, Preface and comments by Z. Jarosiński; texts selected for print by H. Zaworska, Wrocław 1978.

they keep talking about the “cleanliness” of the people that form it. “Men wore simple but clean *rubashka*”. “Their shirts were creased but clean”. “Waiters wore clothes of very thin, creased cloth, but they were clean”. It is not unconditional cleanliness, as can be seen, because it is always with some “but...”. This “but” was exposed easily in “Patrzę na Moskwę” [I look at Moscow] by Aleksander Janta-Pończyński. On the one hand the journalist wrote about the clean shirts of the inhabitants of the capital of the Soviet Union, and on the other he noticed that “the sense of smell is a directional sense. Exposed to the abundance of experiences and often registering very characteristic sensations”²⁸. He blamed a lack of hygiene for this. Moreover, when it is not possible not to write about dirt because the accuracy of a journalist’s account would be at stake, journalists do all they can to accustom themselves with dirt and “tame” it. Wańkowicz, who enthusiastically emphasized the fact that the Russian masses go to the theatre and the opera every evening, wrote about the “smell of *valenki*” hovering over the audience but emphasized that it was a “mawkish smell of *valenki*”. The same adjective was used by Halina Lenczewska-Bormanowa when she described her visit to the hospital. The smell of illness, suffering and blood is described as “mawkish”²⁹.

Looking for “cleanliness” in a crowd, travellers are probably not fully aware of the many meanings of this word. Water is equally ambivalent. The river flowing in a boulevard in Stern’s poem quickly changes into a procession of skeletons, the place of the city crowd is taken by dancing skeletons. In Jasiński’s novel “Pałę Paryż” [I burn Paris] water is contaminated and causes the death of all the Parisians. Only those who drink pure uncontaminated water, i.e. imprisoned communists, will survive. Their liberation will give rise to the new stage in the history of civilization — communism.

In the USSR such concepts as cleanliness, cleaning and eventually cleansing were harbingers of terror and later the synonym of terror. Cat-Mackiewicz drew attention to the presence of such slogans in Soviet public space — he quoted the propaganda slogans which he had seen: “This week we are cleansing housing administrations”³⁰. Słonimski wrote about the “cleansing” of society when he described the *militia* arresting tramps and beggars at railway stations and subsequently locking them up in railway carriages going to the Ural³¹.

²⁸ See: A. Janta-Pończyński, *Patrzę na Moskwę*, Poznań 1933, p. 12.

²⁹ H. Lenczewska-Bormanowa, *ZSSR w oczach kobiety*, p. 219.

³⁰ S. Cat-Mackiewicz, *Myśl w obcęgach*, p. 56.

³¹ A. Słonimski, *Moja Podróż do Rosji*, p. 74.

The crowd flowing in the streets of Moscow is not only subjected to the state's hygienic procedure but is constantly controlled and indoctrinated. Gide wrote about the loudspeakers in the amusement parks but he was aware of their function. Antoni Słonimski, while on his trip to the USSR, wondered what happened to the large private stores in the main streets of Moscow. The answer was simple. They were turned into offices in which information about citizens was collected and catalogued. Crowds flowing in the streets of Moscow were constantly catalogued. What is more, the crowds could watch the cataloguing through large shop windows.

Karl August Wittfogel tried to prove the existence of the inseparable connection between totalitarianism and advanced field irrigation systems³². The construction of irrigation systems, he claimed, requires crowds of disciplined and blindly obedient slaves. Only one state built the largest water engineering facilities in the 1930s or planned to build them — it was the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics. The Stalin White Sea — Baltic Sea Canal completed in 1933 and the plans to reverse the flow of the rivers flowing through the *taiga* so that they could irrigate the Asian steppes and to control their waters through dams and concrete beds in the same way as the countless crowds of people flowing every day through the streets of Soviet towns are just two examples. Many works by Konstantin G. Paustovski are about the problem of hydrology.

THE SECOND BOTTOM OF A METAPHOR

Lifelessness is connected with purity or dirt is connected with life. This idea, often expressed by Zygmunt Bauman, is also verbalized by Professor Dzamar Aliev, who is visited by Frank Westerman, the author of "Engineers of the soul", an important and inspiring book, who is a hydrologist by profession "...you were told that water is a hydrogen oxide. Were you told that water freezes at zero degrees Celsius and boils at one hundred degrees? As if water were colourless, without smell and taste [...] Water is transparent, isn't it? Transparent? [...] You have learned that there are organic and inorganic materials and that water is inorganic — he continued. — Water is neither, it is life giving!"³³.

Translated by Zbigniew Nadstoga

³²See: K.A. Wittfogel, *Władza totalna. Studium porównawcze despotyzmu wschodniego*, Toruń 2004.

³³F. Westerman, *Inżynierowie dusz*, p. 167–168.

Zbigniew Kopec
MOSKWA — MIASTO ŻYWE CZY MARTWE?

Streszczenie

Na początku lat 30. XX wieku rozgrywała się ważna wojna propagandowa. Rząd ZSRR chciał wszystkich przekonać, że na wschodzie Europy stworzono „nowy wspa-
niały świat”. Stalin miał na uwadze nie tylko rząd dusz rzesz proletariuszy czy artystów,
ale też handel. Rosyjskim towarem eksportowym numer jeden było drewno, pozyski-
wane masowo przez darmową siłę roboczą, jaką byli więźniowie gułagów.

W celu kontroli wszelkich informacji powołano w ZSRR Główny Zarząd do Spraw
Literatury i Wydawnictw. W celach propagandowych do ZSRR zapraszano ludzi, któ-
rych można by określić za Trockim mianem *poputczyków*, albo za Leninem, dosad-
niej, „pożytecznych idiotów”. Rosyjskim propagandzistom chodziło o to, by goście
po powrocie do swoich rodzinnych krajów mogli o ZSRR dobrze pisać i mówić. Były
wśród nich najważniejsze postacie świata literatury i kultury. Podczas wizyt realizo-
wano z góry określony program.

Najczęściej pojawiającą się metaforą w reporterskich relacjach z ZSRR jest metafora
„wody”. Goście postrzegają siebie jako osoby zamknięte w batyskafie zanurzonej we
wszechogarniającej cieczy, a mieszkańców stolicy ZSRR jako jednolitą, płynącą, rozle-
wającą się ciecz. Ciecz — jak pisze Zygmunt Bauman — może skazić, zarazić, spowo-
dować śmierć. Jest jednak — jak twierdził Mircea Eliade — zbiorowiskiem wszelkiej
potencjalności. Kolebką życia.

W reporterskich relacjach z ZSRR wyraźne jest napięcie pomiędzy dwiema moż-
liwościami odczytania tej akwaticznej metafory.

