

# The Soviet Union—

## Travel Notes of a South African

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BORN UNDER THE conditions of capitalism and the very worst form of racial oppression since the defeat of Hitlerite Germany, I was naturally thrilled when I was offered the opportunity to visit the Soviet Union.

As a non-White South African who had spent several periods in prison (under the most abominable conditions imaginable) for having dared to demand freedom and democracy for all in Verwoerd's South Africa, I was particularly interested in seeing for myself what socialism meant—What in reality did the abolition of the exploitation of man by man mean? I wanted to experience the equality of different national groups which, I had read, was the cornerstone of Soviet policy.

This is not, however, an attempt to explain the whole theory of socialism nor is it an evaluation of the Soviet system. It is rather a report of a South African in the Soviet Union.

Moscow airport. New Year's eve. We had informed our hosts by cable that we would be arriving the day before, but having missed our plane arrived twenty-four hours late. There was no-one to meet us and we did not know anyone in Moscow whom we could contact. Once passengers from our aircraft had completed their passport declarations, the airport emptied quickly, the travellers rushing off to their respective destinations. My companions and I soon found ourselves almost alone as it was already midnight and the New Year had begun.

The solitary attendant at the terminal could speak only Russian, and we could not explain our problem to her. We felt tired, depressed and not a little apprehensive. Outside the airport it was snowing heavily. Great blankets of snow covered the ground everywhere. Even this unusual sight—I had never seen snow in all my life—failed to reduce the concern I felt, stranded as we were in the huge airport building.

We were not aware that the attendant, noticing our plight, was endeavouring to contact someone in authority to assist us. About an hour later, a gentleman came over from the rear of the building with a young girl who could speak a little English. Once he understood our problem, he explained that as it was New Year's day it would be difficult to contact our hosts.

Then, as on many, many occasions thereafter during my six weeks stay in the Soviet Union, I experienced Soviet hospitality in action. We were quickly bundled into a bus and were taken to a hotel where we were given coffee and beds. The only passengers on the bus, which appeared to have been sent out especially for us, were my companions and I. The driver got out at the hotel, helped us with our luggage and in bidding us farewell, bowed low on the snow-covered ground and said hesitantly, 'We . . . I . . . er . . . love you!' in English. We excitedly spoke to him only to find that these were the only words he appeared to know.

On numerous occasions thereafter I was to find evidence of the great love and warmth the Soviet citizen has for people generally and for foreigners in particular.

Although I was in a strange world, with the people speaking a strange language and, what is more, all of them white, except for an occasional foreign student or visitor, I never once felt lonely or inhibited as most non-Whites feel in the presence of Whites in South Africa. Any doubts I had, after reading the constant stream of propaganda in the South African press, portraying the Soviet people as being always preoccupied and even gloomy, grave and ill-clad, were soon dispelled. They are a wonderfully happy and contented people. Everywhere I went, in the shops, in the streets, in the restaurants, during intervals at the theatres and cinemas, I saw laughing, happy, well-dressed people. The women were always well dressed with fashionable hair styles. I was pleasantly surprised to find that Soviet women, like women everywhere, were extremely fashion-conscious and spent much time in front of huge mirrors provided in the foyers of all public entertainment places.

Unlike South Africa, where racialism and oppression of the non-Whites is condoned, even encouraged by law, Article 123 of the Soviet constitution establishes the

equality of rights of all the citizens of the U.S.S.R. irrespective of their nationality or race, in all spheres of economic, state, cultural, social and political life . . . Any direct or indirect restrictions of the rights of, or conversely, any establishment of direct or indirect privileges for citizens on account of their race or nationality, as well as advocacy of any racial or national exclusiveness or hatred or contempt, is punishable by law.

I doubt if any Soviet citizen has come up before the courts charged under this law in recent years. What I found everywhere, in the cinemas, the theatres, at meetings I attended during the Women's Day celebrations on March 8th, and in the shops was a wholesome love and respect for others so unlike South Africa, where in almost every walk of life we non-Whites are insulted and humiliated, in many cases even when we are spending our hard-earned wages in a White-owned shop.

I spent a few days in Alma Ata, the capital of Khazakstan, where over seventy different national groups, with differing cultures, live and work side by side. This former backward area, inhabited by minorities is now a modern city. Before the revolution one Tsarist official is said to have held the view that, 'there is no other way to manage the Khazaks except through massacres'. The Khazak people on the other hand had a proverb: 'If a Russian travels with you, hold an axe in readiness'.

Today the situation is completely different. The capital seethes with activity with the entire population participating in building their country. The wilderness which once surrounded the city has been transformed into arable land; wandering nomads and small peasant farmers, who barely eked out a living from the land in Tsarist days, are now collective farmers using all the latest techniques and equipment; women, who for centuries wore the veil, are now free citizens and our host in Khazakstan, Mrs. Ramazanov, is a member of the Supreme Soviet. Her mother wore the veil and was never seen in public.

This country which was once torn by national strife has been successfully woven into a family of friendly nations. Where before the 1917 Revolution less than 1 per cent of the population was literate, today illiteracy is unknown. The first train entered Khazakstan twelve years after the revolution. Today the entire Republic is served with the most modern transport.

If one takes into account these facts and the fact that within the borders of the Soviet Union there are 177 distinguishable national groups, speaking some 128 different languages or dialects, and that these minorities elected to join the Union voluntarily and of their own choice, we cannot but agree that the Soviet system has found the key to the problems of national minorities. It has welded together, in friendship and brotherhood, peoples of differing cultures into a united invincible force within a short space of time.

It must be remembered that the young Soviet government achieved these remarkable results despite the fact that, for almost twenty years, there was an effective economic blockade of the country and that the

country lived through the most devastating war against Nazi Germany in which over 20 million people lost their lives.

Another feature of Soviet life that made a great impact on me is the achievements of the Soviet people in the field of education. In each national area of the Soviet Union the schools teach in the native tongue with Russian as the second language and the system of education has enabled the minority peoples to eliminate not only economic but cultural backwardness as well. All the Republics have their own publishing houses; before the Revolution many did not even have written languages! Each Republic has its own Science Academies, its own scientific research institutes.

Women, once veiled and relegated to the kitchen, are now completely emancipated and are working as equals, as deputies, engineers, doctors, state-planners and factory managers.

Education in the Soviet Union begins at the age of three when the child attends one of the 30,000 kindergartens and nursery schools, organized by the state and trade unions. The latter cater for children of parents working in a particular factory or industry. At these nursery schools and kindergartens, several of which I visited in Leningrad, Alma Ata and Moscow, I found children being taught habits of work, neatness and the ability to get along with other children, primarily through games. Music, singing, drawing and rhythmic exercises are part of the methods adopted to develop the child's artistic abilities.

Education is universal, compulsory and free in the Soviet Union. Every child, upon reaching the age of seven years, enters any one of the 250,000 schools which accommodate almost 40 million children. The principal of one of the schools I visited in Alma Ata told me that in the 1914-1915 school year there were only 105,000 pupils in the whole of Khazakstan. There were no colleges. The figures for the 1964-65 term were: 161 colleges and over 10,000 schools accommodating over 2,624,000 children. Between 70 and 76 per cent of the qualified staff in these institutions are women.

I spent an exciting three hours at the Moscow Pioneer Palace, where my guide told me, 'the creative abilities of the children are developed and life unfolded to them'. At the Palace there are over 700 clubs or circles ranging from the study of planets to the circle of ballet dancers. In the radio circle I found boys between the ages of twelve and fifteen constructing radio sets and at the motor car driving circle I found youngsters of about twelve years old learning the mechanisms of a motor-car engine. My guide told me that a child could join any circle of his choice.

University education is not only free, but students are paid while they study.

The education system in the Soviet Union has reached an extremely high standard. If there is any privileged group in the Soviet Union it is the children, and the Soviet State stints nothing in the provision of opportunity for the generation of the future.

Comrade Leonid Brezhnev emphasized this further in his report to the twenty-third Congress of the Communist Party of the U.S.S.R. held in Moscow in March this year:

Eight years ago eight-year compulsory education was introduced . . . for all children of school age. That was an outstanding gain for socialism. Now this achievement no longer satisfies the people of our country. We now have to raise education to an even higher level: to complete, in the main, the transition to universal compulsory **Secondary Education**. Large appropriations will be made for the building of schools, since the number of young people receiving a full secondary education in the next five years will be four times the figure for the preceding five years. . . . In the coming five years, four to five million people will annually leave the secondary and technical schools. Naturally, only a part of them can be enrolled in institutions of higher learning. The bulk will take jobs in the economy, and the five-year plan must make provisions that will enable all of them to find their place in life. . . .

Bookshops are plentiful and always full of people. Translated versions of Tagore, Shakespeare, Dickens and a host of other great writers are in abundance. Libraries too, are always full to capacity. At Moscow's Lenin Library, at which, incidentally, I was accepted as a member for the duration of my stay in the U.S.S.R., I always found a queue of people waiting to get into one of the twenty-two reading rooms which accommodate 2,500 people at a time. On the several occasions I went there, I always found the place a hive of activity and large crowds waiting for an opportunity to get in as soon as others got out.

The library is housed in five multi-storeyed buildings covering a whole block. There are 23 million books in 179 languages stored in a nineteen-storeyed building. Each day, I was told, between 7,000 and 9,000 readers come to the library. During exams anything up to 11,000 people make use of the facilities of this huge institution. Special reading halls are provided for youth and students and among the 2,200 employees are specialized librarians, or consultants as they are called, available to assist readers in every field. Ninety per cent of the staff have University level qualifications.

There are 4,000 libraries in Moscow alone and 400,000 throughout the Soviet Union. This does not include libraries in the various high schools.

Lenin Library is open every day including Sundays from 9 a.m. to 11 p.m.

I had the constant feeling in the Soviet Union that the people found life a grand adventure; their zest and joy for life is phenomenal. They gave me the impression of being confident, alert, happy, even gay. The crowds in the streets are animated and always carrying large parcels or bags. In the theatres, which I visited whenever I had a free evening, I found the patrons keen and attentive; clapping and yelling 'bravo!' at the end of any scene which they particularly enjoyed.

True, there are still many shortages in the Soviet Union. You cannot get ball-point pens, for example. But, everyone is warmly clothed—I have never seen an ill-clad person throughout my stay in the U.S.S.R. There are long waiting lists for people wanting larger apartments, and luxury goods such as refrigerators are in short supply. Steps are being taken to remedy these shortcomings. In the new five-year plan adopted at the last Congress of the Communist Party early this year, one of the cardinal tasks set is to raise the standard of living of the people.

According to the plan, 'the acceleration of the growth of consumer goods is to be ensured by **doubling** the output of producer goods for the branches on which the growth of public consumption immediately depends, namely, agriculture, the light and food industries, trade, housing, construction, and cultural facilities and services. . . .'

The important thing is that whatever is lacking or in short supply or below standard today is only a temporary deficiency. Already steps are being taken to remedy the position, standards are soaring to new and greater heights each year, and will continue to do so except if there is a war.

It is this knowledge that makes the Soviet people fight so ardently for peace. Peace is vital for the well-being of the Soviet people and the Soviet system. Given a decade of peace the glittering brightness ushered in by the great October Revolution will glitter even brighter and all those who sincerely believe in peace and abhor racial intolerance will join with me in wishing these warm, friendly and dynamic people every success in their endeavours to build a new society from which a new man is emerging.