

Revisiting John Steinbeck's *A Russian Journal* from 1948

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The current preparations of the imperialist powers for war against Russia are accompanied by a hysterical campaign in the media and many blatant historical falsifications, which even dominated the recent 75th anniversary of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, a critical event in the most savage war in human history.

In this climate, it is worth revisiting *A Russian Journal* by the remarkable American novelist John Steinbeck from 1948. Together with famed Hungarian-born war photographer Robert Capa (born Endre Friedman), Steinbeck visited the Soviet Union in 1947 at the very outset of the Cold War.

While the Soviet Union was destroyed more than 25 years ago by the Stalinist bureaucracy, the experiences of the Second World War continue to shape the consciousness of millions in the former USSR. Despite certain limitations, this work by Steinbeck and Capa provides valuable insight into the historical experiences of the working class and peasantry of the former USSR.

Steinbeck and Capa made their decisions to go to the Soviet Union amid warnings about “dangerous Russians” and the advice of an American businessman to launch a nuclear bomb against the “red bastards.” Merely two years had passed since the US government dropped two nuclear bombs on Japan, and the specter of yet another world war which would now be fought with nuclear weapons was quite real. The declared goal of Steinbeck and Capa was to see for themselves and document how the “simple people” in the USSR were living.

The population in the USSR had just undergone a war of unspeakable barbarism prosecuted by Nazi Germany, in which 27 million Soviet citizens lost their lives. Much of the territory that now makes up Ukraine, the Baltic states, Belarus and the western part of Russia was completely devastated. To add to the horrors, in 1946, famine had taken the lives of another 1 million people. Then, in 1948, the Cold War broke out in full force and a new series of purges began in the USSR, which lasted until Stalin's death in 1953.

The Soviet bureaucracy's principal motivation in allowing Steinbeck and Capa into the country was undoubtedly the hope that their book would advance its interests—the Stalinists were at that point desperately trying to avoid all-out war with the US. Nonetheless, Steinbeck and Capa faced serious restrictions on where they could travel and what they could see. They were not allowed for the most part to visit factories and working class districts. Most of their meetings were arranged with leading intellectuals in Georgia and Moscow and select layers of the peasantry in Ukraine.

Steinbeck and Capa had a young man imposed on them, ordered to “guide” them around by the Stalinist government. They pointedly call him the “Kremlin gremlin” because of his continuous efforts to bar their access to some of the most intriguing areas and people.

Thus, while Steinbeck and Capa were able to capture in images some of the horrifying impact of the Nazi invasion, their account only reflects in a very partial manner the social circumstances prevailing in the USSR,

including the vast divide between the mass of the population and the Stalinist officialdom.

Historian Donald Filtzer explains that “Soviet cities after the war were filthy places, covered for most of the year in piles of garbage, mounds of human excrement, and torrents of raw sewage flowing through open gutters or simply spilling out onto the streets and side-walks.” These conditions gave the lie to the recurring and preposterous claim of the bureaucracy that socialism had been built in Russia. In fact, sociologists have estimated that in the Soviet Union of the early 1950s, the gini coefficient, which is used to measure social inequality, was similar to the level currently registered in America.

Steinbeck and Capa hint at this inequality in their depictions of the extravagant lifestyle of the Moscow bureaucracy, which contrasts starkly with the living conditions of the people they encounter during much of their travels.

It strikes a disturbing note that there is no reference at all in *A Russian Journal* to the Great Purges of the 1930s, even though Moscow was at the very center of the mass murder of socialist intellectuals and workers just a decade earlier, in what historian Vadim Rogovin aptly described as a “political genocide.” A decision to suppress the full truth about Stalinism, in line with the Popular Front outlook of the co-authors, no doubt played a role.

However, they do hint at these issues in Steinbeck's reflections on a visit to the Lenin Museum in Moscow:

“There are statues of Lenin in every possible pose, and later, in the pictures of his life, Stalin enters. But in the whole museum there is not one picture of Trotsky. Trotsky, as far as Russian history is concerned, has ceased to exist, and in fact never did exist. This is a kind of historical approach which we cannot understand. This is history as we wish it might have been rather than as it was. For there is no doubt that Trotsky exerted a great historical effect on the Russian Revolution. There is also no doubt that his removal and his banishment were of great historical importance. But to the young Russians he never existed. To the children who go into the Lenin Museum and see the history of the Revolution there is no Trotsky, good or bad.”

To their credit, Capa and Steinbeck are eager to get out of the capital and away from the circles of Western diplomats and Soviet bureaucrats. They leave for Stalingrad, which, in 1942-1943, was the scene of one of the bloodiest battles in world history. The defeat of the Wehrmacht there in early 1943 marked the beginning of the end for the Nazi Third Reich.

An estimated 2 million people lost their lives in the Battle of Stalingrad, including 850,000 soldiers from the Axis powers. The rest were Soviet soldiers and civilians, many of whom fell victim to the Luftwaffe's air raids on the city. When Capa and Steinbeck arrive in Stalingrad, most of it is still in rubble and the majority of the people living there are housed in cellars and ruins.

In a moving passage in *A Russian Journal*, they describe a young woman who lives in the rubble:

“Directly behind the hotel, and in a place overlooked by our windows, there was a little garbage pile, where melon rinds, bones, potato peels, and such things were thrown out. And a few yards farther on, there was a little hummock, like the entrance to a gopher hole. And every morning, early, out of this hole a young girl crawled. She had long legs and bare feet, and her arms were thin and stringy, and her hair was matted and filthy. She was covered with years of dirt, so that she looked very brown. And when she raised her face, it was one of the most beautiful faces we have ever seen. Her eyes were crafty, like the eyes of a fox, but they were not human. ... The other people who lived in the cellars of the lot rarely spoke to her. But one morning I saw a woman come out of another hole and give her half a loaf of bread. And the girl clutched at it almost snarlingly and held it against her chest. She looked like a half-wild dog at the woman who had given her the bread, and watched her suspiciously until she had gone back into her own cellar, and then she turned and buried her face in the slab of black bread, and like an animal she looked over the bread, her eyes twitching back and forth. And as she gnawed at the bread, one side of her ragged filthy shawl slipped away from her dirty young breast, and her hand automatically brought the shawl back and covered her breast, and patted it in place with a heart-breaking feminine gesture.”

They also visit a tractor factory, but are not allowed to take any pictures. In Steinbeck’s words:

“We wanted to see and photograph the famous Stalingrad tractor factory. For it was in this factory that the men had continued to build tanks when the Germans were firing on them. And when the Germans got too close, they put down their tools, and went out and defended the factory, and then went back and continued working. ... Here in the factory, which had been defended by its own workers, and where those same workers were still building tractors, could be found the spirit of the Russian defense. And here, in its highest and most overwhelming aspect, we found the terror of the camera.”

The trip of Steinbeck and Capa to Ukraine in particular provides valuable and moving insights into the lives of the Soviet people in the wake of the Second World War. Ukraine had been at the center of Nazi war strategy against the USSR as a whole and was the site of some of the worst results of the “scorched earth policy.” Steinbeck writes about Kiev:

“Here the Germans showed what they could do. Every public building, every library, every theater, even the permanent circus, destroyed, not with gunfire, not through fighting, but with fire and dynamite. Its university is burned and tumbled, its schools in ruins. This was not fighting, this was the crazy destruction of every cultural facility the city had, and nearly every beautiful building that had been put up during a thousand years.”

Steinbeck emphasizes the pride the Ukrainian peasants take in every little advancement made by the economy since the end of the war. In a passage that conveys the moods of wide layers of the Soviet population and the enduring belief in progress that had been inspired by the October Revolution, he observes:

“More and more we were realizing how much the Russian people live on hope, hope that tomorrow will be better than today. ... It is the crops next yet, it is the comfort that will come in ten years, it is the clothes that will be made very soon. If ever a people took its energy from hope, it is the Russian people.”

Steinbeck and Capa were at the height of their careers in the 1940s. Steinbeck was known internationally as the author of *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), his hugely popular book on the Great Depression, subsequently made into a film by John Ford. In the 1930s and 40s, he had moved in artistic circles close to the Communist Party and the trade unions. Later on, like many left-liberal intellectuals of his generation he shifted to the right. In the 1950s, he reportedly offered his service to the Central Intelligence Agency. He went on to support the Vietnam War.

Capa, whose first published photograph was of Leon Trotsky speaking

in Copenhagen in 1932, was recognized as one of the world’s great war photographers. He had taken startling photos in the Spanish Civil War and on the Western front in the Second World War, many of which have become iconic. Politically, Capa was influenced by the working class struggles of the 1920s and 30s and the socialist movement, but always remained skeptical toward Marxism and never joined any party. Tragically, Capa died in 1954 while covering the First Indochina War at age 40.

Their account and pictures of what they saw are permeated with genuine sympathy for and interest in the Soviet working population. Whatever their own political views, both were members of a generation of intellectuals whose thinking had been profoundly shaped and inspired by the Russian Revolution and the horrors of two world wars. Steinbeck and Capa did see their tasks as journalist and photographer in telling and showing their readers aspects of social reality.

Their *Russian Journal* initially received much praise in the press, but the toxic climate of the McCarthyite witch-hunts in the late 1940s resulted in its being quickly swept under the carpet.

Many of the problems discussed by Steinbeck and Capa—above all, the overwhelming horror of the Second World War—are still very much alive among workers, youth and the elderly in the former Soviet Union.

The population of the former Soviet Union faces the immense danger of an assault by the imperialist powers and, at the same time, extreme exploitation and oppression at the hands of the Russian oligarchy. After the vast and traumatic experiences of the twentieth century, there are many stories to be told. Yet no significant journalist in the West (or in Russia, for that matter)—or major novelist—even cares today to find out what these workers and youth have been going through, what they think and feel, let alone analyze and understand the objective social conditions and historical problems they face.

This is the result of a shift to the right of these layers throughout an entire historical period and their deep alienation from and indeed hostility to the working class, both at home and internationally.

This shift makes the Steinbeck-Capa effort in 1947-1948 stand out all the more.

All of Robert Capa’s pictures of the trip to the USSR can be viewed here.

A Russian Journal appears in the Penguin Modern Classics Series and is available both as a paperback and on Kindle. The full text can also be read here.



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