

Laurens van der Post

## From Riga to Samarkand

by Emanuel Litvinoff



*JOURNEY INTO RUSSIA*, by Laurens van der Post (Hogarth, 30s).

**M**ANY a traveller has survived a journey into Russia by clinging to his prejudices like a shipwrecked man to a spar. Russia is too various, complex, paradoxical and vast to be easily comprehended. How to convey the stunning immensity of a land two-and-a-half times the size of the United States, three times as big as Australia, infinitely various in climate and geography and populated by 220 million people of 185 different nationalities? Easier to travel the tourist circuit, grab a few impressions, a notebook full of official statistics, and emerge, panting, with ignorance intact to fill yet another book with grey slabs of pro- or anti-Communist unreality.

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The next best thing to seeing the place for oneself, therefore, is to read *Journey Into Russia*. Colonel van der Post communicates the physical sensations of travel, describes a landscape, a hotel meal, a conversation with a stranger, in such a way that one becomes his travelling companion. His book is mainly an account of people and places encountered in transcontinental journeys through the Soviet Union from Riga and Leningrad in the north to Khabarovsk in the far east, from the resonantly exotic cities along the southern borders of Soviet Asia—Alma-Ata, Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara, Tbilisi—to Rostov, Kharkov, Kiev and Odessa. He succeeds in making the journey exhilarating as well as instructive. The surface impressions are augmented by an unobtrusive scholarship that often produces illuminating insights. The monumental architecture of Soviet orthodoxy and the massively uniform conventions that blur the distinction between the many races of the Soviet Union overlay profound differences of history and culture. The farther away from Moscow, eastwards in Asia

and northwards in the Baltic republics, the past still resists the steamroller, although Colonel van der Post has a grim cameo of a heroine of Soviet labour working like a termite in a carpet factory of Turkmenia, and everywhere the Great Russian colonists extend the areas of conformity. Members of minority races, he notes, are hungry for recognition of the special character of their own people and obsessed "with the brilliant memory of the past."

It is mainly through such observations that the author approaches political comment. Sometimes he is more direct. Visiting the great Siberian hydroelectric project at Bratsk, once itself the site of a notorious labour camp, he was told that there had never been forced labour camps in the area and that there was bitter resentment against Mr Averill Harriman for having made the "shameful" accusation that there was. He notes the muted but rebellious individualism of the young intellectual generation in Russia. He also observes that anti-Semitism "exists violently and both wide and deep in Russia," that "one of the most distressing features of the cases of currency infringement which came up for trial while I was in Russia was the deliberate attempt to attach all blame on the Jews," that "the Russian Jews are cast for playing the sacrificial rôle." He describes Pasternak as "the first Soviet saint and martyr" in the eyes of young Soviet writers and believes that the values he communicates to the successor generation will profoundly affect the future of Russia.

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None of this is, of course, new but the testimony is impressive. Laurens van der Post appears to have a scrupulous regard for the truth; is sceptical, well-informed, unprejudiced and amusing. A truly civilised, discriminating observer, he has really experienced Russia and conveyed something of its violent contrasts, its subtle distinctions and its immense fascination.