



# The Truth Is Winter

EUGENE S. STAPLES

"**N**ASHA RUSSKAYA ZIMA!" With what pride the Russians say it: "Our Russian Winter!" Winter bestrides the Russian land and shapes the Russian character. The harshness of its rule is not only tolerated but respected and even loved. For men love strength and seek clarity in their lives; there is no clearer, stronger statement of the seasons than a Russian winter.

Here is neither thaw nor slush, drizzle nor fog. This is elemental force and beauty: clear white forms, forests stark, black coats and boots, the stillness of extreme cold, the shock of frozen air in nostrils and lungs.

The months of summer, with their wildflowers in the marshes and the long, electric, light-diffused nights, and golden, melancholy autumn pass quickly. In truth they are a dream; the reality is winter. Tatyana fell in love with Eugene Onegin in the summer. But in the snows, Onegin killed Lenski, and in the Petersburg winter, Tatyana spurned Onegin.

In the curious way it has of helping men bring form into their lives, history helped the Russian Bolsheviks to shape the festive year. It simply happened that the October Revolution took place in November; Lenin did not plan it that way. Nor did the Russian Communists have anything to do with the bloody events of May of 1886 in Chicago. But these two dates—the November

7 Revolution (or October 25 by the old Russian calendar) and the May 1 workers' holiday—mark the beginning and end of winter in the Soviet Union, and constitute the main feast days of the Communist world religion.

By the calendar, November 7 in Moscow is still autumn. But sprawled across the plain of the Moscow River under the shadow of the Sparrow Hills, the bedecked and bannered city smells winter in the air and is ready. The snow-cleaning equipment is oiled, the vast central-heating conduits are at work, citizens have donned fur hats and black overcoats, river and canal traffic slows to a halt, and sweepers prepare the great parks—Gorky, Sokolniki, Luzhniki—for winter skaters.

For weeks the city has lain awake listening to the monstrous roar of the tanks and the missile carriers as the troops go through the weird midnight practices for the great parade, observed mainly by curious foreign military attachés and newspapermen. Portraits of the party leaders, set out in super life size at strategic intersections throughout the city, are carefully checked by one and all for order of precedence. *Pravda* publishes its greetings and slogans for the holiday, and all note in what order the Chinese, Albanians, and Yugoslavs appear and how the salutations are phrased.

On the day of the great parade, the elite of this enormous colonial

empire congregate in Red Square, fur-collared and muffed, hung with cameras, joyful or resentful, to watch the rulers display their armed might. The eight-hundred-man military band blares. The aging colonels, fifty-year-old legs straining against accumulating fat and tiring muscle, goose-step across the red bricks at the head of their elegant young officers. The goose step grows higher in inverse proportion to age, and the boy cadets goose-step with a snap, like frightening marionettes. The Kremlin guns boom their salute, pigeons explode in fright from the Kremlin heights, and in climax, across the square snarl the wicked tanks and missile carriers.

After the military, drab workers, poor-looking in contrast to the gleaming, burnished soldiers and machines, crowd into the square for the peaceful part of the parade. The foreign guests promptly go home. At mid-afternoon, the city gives itself up to the mild revelry that Communist mores encourage. Throughout the city, in tiny crowded apartments and tenements, family parties and friends get together to eat heavily of smoked fish and birds, sour cream and cabbage, expensive chocolate candy and oranges, and to get mildly or uproariously drunk on sweet wine, vodka, and Armenian brandy.

**T**HEN in late November comes the quiet time: the great continental Arctic air mass presses down on the

plain: the thermometer drops and drops: one day out of a colorless sky dry snow sifts down. Suddenly, the sky clears: the sunlight sparkles, the air fractures in one's lungs, it is ten degrees below zero centigrade, and all are gloriously happy. "*Kak Khorosho!*" says the embassy chauffeur. "There is nothing like Our Russian Winter."

As the snow sifts down and piles up and the days grow shorter, life falls into winter routine. The adults go about their work, clad in the universal black of Russian winter. The older children rise in the dark to walk in the bitter cold to the red-brick schools, boys huddled in gray tunics and black coats, the girls in brown dresses and black aprons. Little ones, bundled into imitation fur coats and hats, swaddled in rough wool shawls and scarves, booted and mittened, are sent off to the parks with Grandmother. The gardens of the ruined monasteries and the simple city parks are never lifeless during the winter day. The old people walk slowly, hands clasped behind their backs, talking guardedly about ancient tragedies or present sickness. Children ski on stubby staves or ride wooden sleds behind doting grandparents.

At night, the young crowd the great skating rinks. At Gorky Park, across the river from downtown Moscow, the authorities close the park and spray the miles of footpaths and roads. Skaters fly down the glittering paths, their shouts and laughter frozen in the black air, or cut solitary arabesques on the ice above the river landing. Saturday afternoons and Sunday, thousands of citizens crowd onto commuter trains to the outskirts of the city to set off along ski trails through the forests. This is cross-country skiing, more accurately called "running on skis" in the northern countries—on skis with no heel attachment. Great cross-country skiers, the Russians are terrible downhill, though their lack of skill never slows them down. Indeed, Sunday-morning downhill skiing at the Sparrow (Lenin) Hills below Moscow University is a hair-raising and often bone-crushing experience as young bloods demonstrate Slavic sang-froid and fatalism.

For the few foreigners resident in Moscow, winter is welcome. The "silly season," as American embassy people describe summer, with all the tourists and official visitors, is past. One gets down to the serious business of life: the children are at school; the heavy season of diplomatic work and official entertaining begins; the Moscow concert and theatre season, which starts in September, enters its serious phase.

The thing to do in the Moscow winter, old hands agree, is to hear the music at the Conservatory—Oistrakh, Rostropovich, Gilels, Richter. Unfortunately, the ballet is overrated and somewhat decadent. The famed Moscow dramatic theatres are starved for playwrights after fifty years of political censorship. Chekhov is great but musty. The real Soviet intellectuals go only to concerts and movies. "Have you seen such and such a play?" one asks a Soviet writer. "My dear fellow," he says, pleased with his answer, "I have not been to the theatre in ten years."

**I**N MIDWINTER the great Russian city lives intensely in its frosts, the dull red sun hanging like pop art sculpture low in the mists over Red Square and frost flakes drifting down out of the moonlit calm. But



even city-loving Russians are never freed of the blandishments of the Russian countryside. Ivan Bunin wrote: "Russian man . . . primevally subjected to natural influences." Those Russians who can, escape Moscow for part of the winter to the great or small dachas clustered about the city.

Dacha means a country house. There are many summer dachas. But only a few thousand lucky citizens of Moscow, beneficiaries of party or government position, talent, or graft, have access to year-round dachas with central heating. These favored ones flee to the countryside in the dead of winter, and there listen to the ancient heartbeat of Russian life.

One night under the frozen moon, we drove out from Moscow with a poet and a short-story writer to a dacha in a slumbering village, snow piled to the eaves. Winter reared awesome white shapes all around. The air crackled with the cold, and the champagne cooled in five minutes in the snow. We sat and argued politics and writing for hours in front of a log fire, and when we left, crunching and squeaking through the superdried snow, the mighty winter night embraced us with stunning cold.

The two heaters in our Volkswagen labored to keep us warm during the twenty miles back to the city. Behind thick doors and frosted glass, with cotton and rags stuffed in the cracks, the city slept underground in its burrow. We passed no one but an occasional solitary Volga cab, streaming exhaust into the icy night as its green taxi light disappeared into the trackless city.

The poet said that Americans damage Soviet writers when they report on intimate conversations, and that if Americans want to further the cause of liberalism they should shut up about it. I said I agreed in part but not entirely, and that in any case there was little I could do about it.

**L**ATER, at the end of winter, when the poet came to the embassy one day with a friend, also a short-story writer, he repeated his argument. Then he forgot his train of thought when he saw our receptionist.

"Who is that beautiful blonde creature?" the poet asked eagerly.

"That is the daughter of S\_\_\_\_\_, our \_\_\_\_\_ officer," I replied. (This was a young American girl, indeed blonde and beautiful, working part-time during a visit to her parents.)

"My friend [the short story writer] has just fallen in love with her," said the poet. "Can you arrange something?"

"No," I said, "you know damn well I can't." Such is the fate of American-Soviet understanding. . . .

The American embassy's dacha lies north from Moscow on the trunk road to the great monastery at Zagorsk. According to legend, it belonged to Stalin's son, the hard-drinking Red Air Force officer whose carousing and wenching were once the scandal of Moscow and who disappeared without trace or tears after his father's death. A huge old stucco mansion, isolated in a pine grove and eminently suited to orgies, it now houses more proper pursuits, mainly unraveling the nerves of embassy wives escaping with or from their children and the cramped quarters of Moscow apartments. In winter, my wife and I used to pack a knapsack of garlicky Russian sausage, Danish cheese, and *stolichnaya* vodka and ski back from the dacha into the snowy woods, pushing along silent trails to find a solitary clearing with an old log to sit on at lunchtime. The low winter sun, the delight of the lungs in the sparkling air, the taste of the sausage and cheese, the frozen jolt of the vodka—these are the purest of pleasures.

But come March and April, and old Moscow grows visibly tired, gray, sullen, and malevolent, the very skin drawn back from the cold and the long nocturnal darknesses. It seems it will never end. The frost, which in December joyfully snapped one awake, in March hits dully like an awaited blow. Snow piles high, dirty, disgusting. People plod, faces turned down to the brown, dirty sidewalks. Around the ring roads, hundreds of dirty green trucks clank and grumble along in second gear, belching nauseous black smoke and losing large metal parts. Skiers and skaters sit morosely at home. Every concert has been heard, the theatre is out of the question, the news is all bad.

One day, a soft breeze steals into the capital; the ice begins to break on the river; thaw begins. It will shake the earth.

Pushkin, writing about his beloved Petersburg and the Neva, said: "The river threw itself like a wild beast on the city." In Moscow, the little river is banked and chained with concrete. But around Moscow the waters flood the lowlands and turn the villages into seas of icy water and mud.

Surrounded, oppressed, enamored of the forces of nature, the Russians think and express themselves in allegorical and symbolic terms in a manner disappearing from the more sophisticated West. Freeze and thaw are thus the accurate clichés of the political life of Russia.

The first anti-Stalin novel was Ilya Ehrenburg's *The Thaw*. The greatest thaw scene ever filmed occupies ten minutes of *Clear Skies*, the first anti-Stalin film shown on Soviet screens. Thousands of tons of ice irresistibly and majestically thunder down a northern river to symbolize the end of the Stalin winter, the

beginning of the Khrushchev spring. Well . . . One can argue whether spring really came—or how far it advanced.

Strolling along the embankment of the Moscow River on a sunny, chilly day in April, shortly after the last ice floes had gone off downstream, I watched two workers strip down to their black drawers and dive into the brown waters. (The river in the city is not inviting at its summer best.)

"Hey, Ivan," shouted a passerby. "*S'uma soshol ty?*" "Have you gone off your rocker?"

"*Nyet!*" shouted Vanya, image of Russian daring. "*Vyesna Prishla.*" "Spring has come."

Across the great northern land, spring finally does come: marsh flowers, groves budding round the villages, the sky increasingly high, wide, light; birds returning to the belfries of ruined churches, the great religious celebration of the rebirth of life: Russian Easter; Passover; Soviet May Day.

The Orthodox. The Jews. The Communists.

## The Innocent Eye

HENNIG COHEN

FRANCES B. JOHNSTON, a photographer of great sensitivity, recorded some of the finest period pieces of the turn of the century: the Columbian Exposition, Admiral Dewey's triumphal voyage back from Manila Bay, mansions built by McKim, Mead & White and decorated by Elsie de Wolfe, hazardous mining conditions in the Pennsylvania coal fields, and the public educational system of Washington, D.C. For the Paris Exposition of 1900, she was commissioned to prepare a display on Hampton Institute, an industrial and normal school for Negroes and Indians founded shortly after the Civil War. Forty-four photographs from this exhibit are presently being shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. They radiate such innocence and good hope that they make me want to cry.

Miss Johnston composed her pictures deftly and used the clear win-

try atmosphere of tidewater Virginia to advantage. Platinum prints permitted her considerable tonal range. But it is not her technical nor even her aesthetic accomplishments that give the photographs their poignancy. It is her earnest portrayal of a viewpoint so different from her own.

Her camera eye reveals a world of simple faith in the religion of the better mousetrap. Be useful and you will be needed, appreciated, loved. Every man can make his own way through his own efforts. Success is a reward for virtue and a sign of grace. The greater the odds, the greater the glory.

In 1900, Booker T. Washington, Hampton class of 1875, a black Horatio Alger who raised himself up from slavery, was preaching the business ethic as the sole way to salvation. Soon he was to be accused by W. E. B. Du Bois of seeking economic opportunity for the Negro