
EASTERN APPROACHES



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by

FITZROY MACLEAN



JONATHAN CAPE
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE
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[frontis: 'an enormous sua hat'
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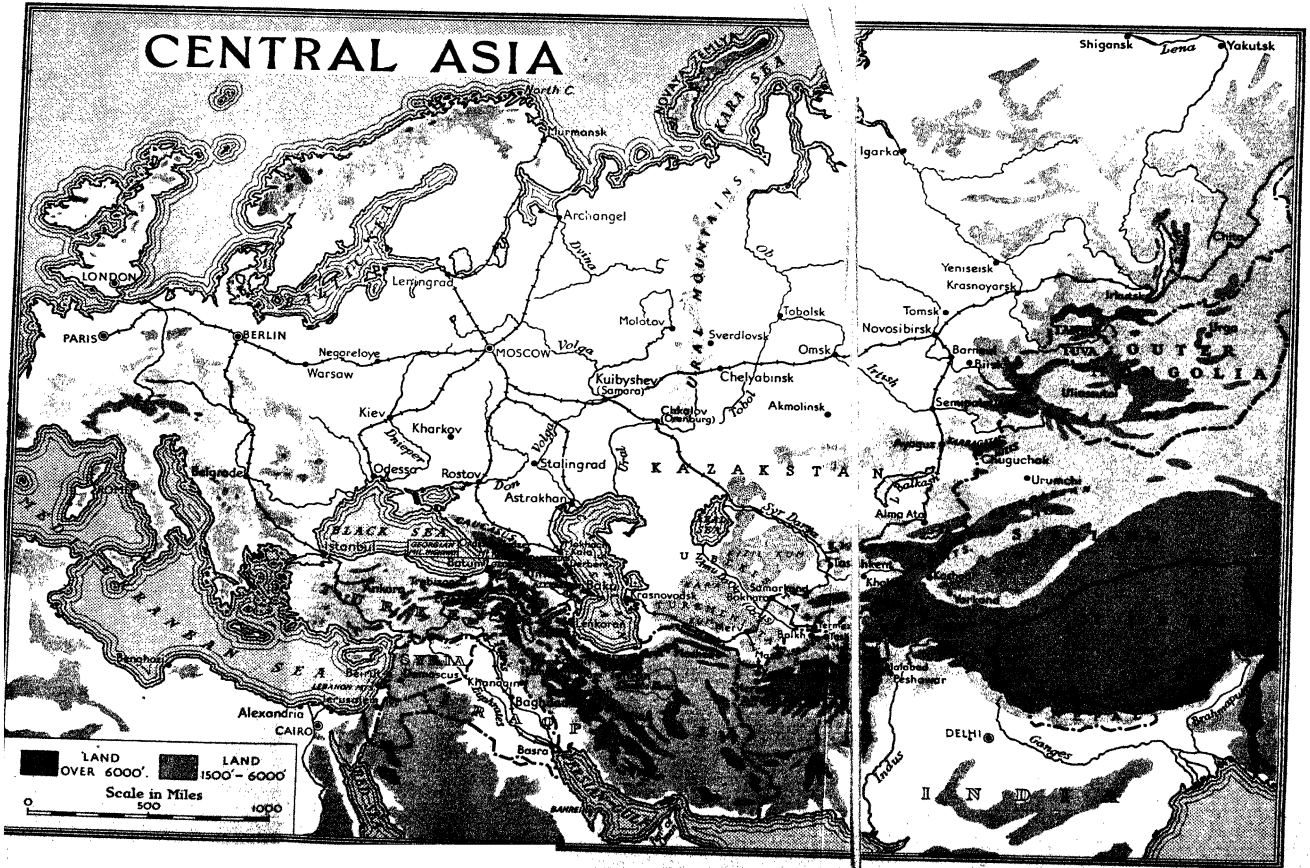
F. M.

To
MYFATHER a.,d MOTHER

PART ONE
GOLDEN ROAD

For lust of knowing what should not be known
We make the golden journey to Samarkand.
FLECKER

CENTRAL ASIA



CHAPTER I

INTERNATIONALE

Slowly gathering speed, the long train pulled out of the Gare du Nord. The friends who had come to see me off waved and started to turn away; the coaches jolted as they passed over the points, and the bottles of mineral water by the window clinked gently one against the other. Soon we had left the dingy grey suburbs of Paris behind us and were running smoothly through the rainswept landscape of northern France. Night was falling and in my compartment it was nearly dark. I did not switch on the light at once, but sat looking out at the muddy fields and dripping woods.

I was on my way to Moscow, and, from Moscow, I was going, if it was humanly possible, to the Caucasus and Central Asia, to Tashkent, Bokhara and Samarkand. Already, as I watched that drab, sodden countryside rushing past the window, I saw in my imagination the jagged mountains of Georgia, the golden deserts, the green oases and the sunlit domes and minarets of Turkestan. Suddenly, as I sat there in the half light, I felt immensely excited.

In many ways I was sorry to be leaving Paris. It had been an ideal post at which to begin a diplomatic career, and the years I had spent there had been uninterruptedly happy. It had been, too, an agreeable city to live in. There was the broad sweep of the Champs Elysées and the Avenue du Bois; the magnificence of the Place Vendôme and the Place de la Concorde; the grey stone of the buildings gilded by the sunlight; the green of the trees; the life and noise of the streets less overwhelming, more intimate than the roar of the London traffic. There were those pleasant walks on summer evenings along the banks of the Seine, under the trees, to the Ile de la Cité; friends' houses with their cool panelled rooms; the lights reflected in the river, as one went home at night.

And then there was the enjoyable sensation of being permanently

GOLDEN ROAD

at the centre of things. Something was always happening; somebody was always arriving or leaving. We lived in an atmosphere of continual crisis. It might be Mr. Ramsay MacDonald and Sir John Simon, looking a little shaken after a rough crossing, on their way to talk things over with Signor Mussolini at Stresa; or Sir Samuel Hoare, always so neat and tidy, come to see Monsieur Laval, intelligent, olive-skinned and leering, with his discoloured teeth and crumpled white tie; or Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin, hurrying home from Aix-les-Bains, the serenity of their summer holiday disturbed by talk of sanctions and the threat of war; or Mr. Eden, travelling backwards and forwards to Geneva; or Mr. Churchill, then a private Member of Parliament, unfashionably preoccupied with questions of defence, come to talk to the French soldiers about their eastern frontier.

All these distinguished visitors had to be met, fed, supplied with the latest reports on the situation, and sent off again by air or train with their retinue of secretaries and detectives. At all hours of the day and night the shiny black official cars crunched the gravel of the Embassy courtyard; telephones rang querulously and continuously; red and black leather dispatch boxes filled with sheaves of Foreign Office telegrams flew backwards and forwards to the Chancery; Sir George Clerk, the most hospitable of Ambassadors, dispensed informal but lavish entertainment in the most magnificent of Embassies. It was an exhausting but also an entertaining and instructive existence. Small wonder that in Paris we felt ourselves closer to the centre of things than our less fortunate colleagues stranded in remote Embassies and Legations in South America and eastern Europe.

Everything that happened in the world seemed to affect us directly and violently in Paris. One crisis followed another: the Abyssinian War, the remilitarization of the Rhineland, the Spanish Civil War. Each time angry crowds demonstrated in the streets. At one moment they wanted to drown M. Herriot. 'A l'eau, Herriot/ they cried menacingly. The Abyssinian War and the threat of sanctions against Italy brought a violent reaction against Great Britain on the part of the pro-Fascist right wing. 'Conspuez Sir Clerk f they shouted when the Ambassador appeared, and we were given a platoon of Gardes Mobiles with steel helmets and fixed bayonets to guard the Embassy.

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Over Spain rival factions raised rival cries, the Left predominating. 'Des avions pour TEspagne' they yelled rhythmically, as they marched along the boulevards. Strangely enough, the remilitarization of the Rhineland, which to those who knew what was going on behind the scenes was the biggest crisis of all, left the general public relatively unmoved, though, had they been aware of our refusal to support their Government against Hitler at this vital juncture, they would have been justified in going to almost any lengths to show their disapproval of British policy.

Nor, in those troubled years before the war, did French domestic affairs present a less animated picture than the European scene itself. From the February Riots of 1934 to the advent of the Front Populaire and the sit-down strikes of 1936, parliamentary democracy in France was at its wildest and most unstable. Governments were formed and reformed, shuffled and re-shuffled, by politicians of the Right, Left and Centre, all of whom the people of France took less and less seriously as they became more and more discredited. Some remained in power for a few weeks, some for a few days. Every week increasingly inflammatory speeches were made and increasingly unsavoury scandals brought to light. On the extreme Left and on the extreme Right private armies were forming, always ready for a scuffle with each other or with the police. Up and down the Champs Elysées crowds of demonstrators surged threateningly, overturning the litde tables outside the cafés. Even in the Chamber of Deputies the proceedings were daily interrupted by shouts of 'Traître!' and 'Assassin!' and, on occasion, by free fights.

In French politics the dominating factor had long been a strong leftward trend and, in the summer of 1936, to the accompaniment of strikes and rioting, the Front Populaire had come to power under weak Socialist leadership. Behind this convenient facade the strength of the Communists, ably led by Maurice Thorez, was steadily increasing. At the elections they had polled more votes than ever before. For the first time their leaders were associated, though indirectly, with the Government of the country. In the trade union movement their influence was in the ascendant. They enjoyed the advantages of power without its responsibilities. There were many ways by which they could exert

GOLDEN ROAD

pressure on the Government. Some people held them responsible for the strikes which were paralysing the industrial and economic life of the country.

Two pictures from that period of uncertainty and disorder stick in my mind.

One is a scene in the gigantic Renault Motor Works at Boulogne-sur-Seine, newly seized by the strikers. With two friends I had managed to slip past the pickets on the gate. Wandering through workshop after workshop where girls and men were bedding down for the night on the luxurious cushions of half-finished limousines, we eventually came to the Managing Director's office. There the Strike Committee had established their Headquarters. The luxuriously furnished room was draped from floor to ceiling with red flags, plentifully adorned with hammers and sickles. Against this improvised background sat the strikers' leaders, unshaven, with berets or cloth caps on their heads and cigarettes drooping from the corners of their mouths, presided over by a massively formidable woman whose deftly flicking knitting-needles struck me as symbolic. From this nerve centre, as we watched, orders went out by messenger or telephone to different parts of the works. For M. Léon Blum, that amiable drawing-room Socialist and his newly formed Government, they told us, they cared less than nothing. It was all rather like a scene out of a play. Was this, we wondered, a passing phase? Or did it represent the shape of things to come?

Another memory from those days is of a vast crowd, many thousands strong, sweeping along towards the Place de la Bastille on July 14th. Above it waves a forest of red flags with here and there an isolated tricolour, and, borne aloft on the shoulders of the crowd, immense portraits of Stalin, brooding over the proceedings with benign malignity, and the French Communist leaders: Maurice Thorez, square and bloated-looking, who, when war came was to run away to Moscow; Gabriel Péri, the frail intellectual who was to become a resistance leader and be tortured to death in a Gestapo prison; Jacques Duclos, spectacled and cunning; Andre Marty, the mutineer of the Black Sea Fleet; Marcel Cachiti, who had become the Grand Old Man of French Communism. Out in front a tall, pale girl in a red shirt

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strides along, her black hair streaming out behind her* From time to time sections of the crowd start to sing and the lugubrious strains of the 'Internationale' rise and fall above the tumult Then, as the singing dies away, there is a shrill cry of 'Les Soviets!*' and thousands of hoarse voices take up the rhythmic refrain, 'LES SOV-I-ETS PAR-TOUT. LES SOV-I-ETS PAR-TOUT/'

In the disturbed state of their country, with the Germans back in the Rhineland and a weak Government in power at home, it was only natural that many Frenchmen should begin to look about them with increasing anxiety. Their looks turned eastwards: across the reassuring fortifications of the Maginot Line to France's hereditary enemy, Germany; further east still to Russia — Russia, France's new found and untried ally; Russia, whose rulers, so many people thought, bore no small share of responsibility for France's present disturbed state.

Russia seemed to hold the answer to so many of their problems. Could they count on Russian help in the event of a war with Germany ; What would this help amount to? What was the truth about the Red Army, about the Soviet economic and industrial position? Were the Russians, working through the Communist International, responsible for the political and industrial disturbances in France? If so, why were they seeking by these methods to undermine the strength of their only ally? Would the Russians leave the Spanish Republicans in the lurch? Would they, in case of need, help Czechoslovakia or Poland? Did the Soviet system offer a solution to any of France's own social and economic problems? Or was it a menace to which Fascism or Nazism were the only answers? Such were the questions which every thinking Frenchman was asking himself.

Nor did the problems concern France alone. To every European it was of vital importance to know what the Soviet Union stood for, what her aims were and what part she would play in the international conflagration which already seemed inevitable. The years which I spent in Paris, with its essentially continental political atmosphere, had convinced me that, without a first-hand knowledge of the Soviet Union and of its political system, any picture that one might form of the international situation would inevitably be incomplete.

GOLDEN ROAD

Russia also had other attractions. After a year at the Foreign Office and three more in Paris, I had decided that a change to a more active and less luxurious existence would do me no harm.

I was twenty-five. But, already, I was beginning to get a little set in my ways; perhaps, I reflected in my rare moments of introspection, even a little smug. There were those pin-striped suits from Schölte; those blue and white shirts from Beale and Inman with their starched collars; those neat, well-cleaned shoes from Lobb; the dark red carnation that came every morning from the florist in the Faubourg Saint Honoré. After breakfast, a brief walk under the trees in the Champs Elysées. Or sometimes a ride among the leafy avenues of the Bois. Then the daily, not disagreeable task of drafting telegrams and dispatches, on thick, blue laid paper, in a style and a handwriting which, I flattered myself, both discreetly reflected a classical education. Occasional telephone calls. Occasional visits to the Quai d'Orsay: the smell of bees-wax in the passages; the rather fusty smell of the cluttered, steam-heated offices; *comment allcz-vous, eher collègue?* Luncheon at a restaurant or at somebody's house: politics and people. Afterwards, a pleasant feeling of repletion. Then, more telegrams, more dispatches, more telephone calls till dinner time. A bath. A drink. And then all the different lights and colours and smells and noises of Paris at night. Big official dinner parties, with white ties and decorations. Small private dinner parties with black ties and that particular type of general conversation at which the French excel. The best-dressed women, the best food, the best wine, the best brandy in the world. Parties in restaurants. Parties in night clubs. The Theatre de Dix Heures, the chansonniers: jokes about politics and sex. The Bai Tabarin: die rattle and bang of the can-can; the plump thighs of the dancers in their long black silk stockings. Week after week; month after month. An agreeable existence, but one that, if prolonged unduly, seemed bound to lead to chronic liver trouble, if to nothing worse.

I have always relished contrasts, and what more complete contrast could there be after Paris than Moscow? I had seen something of the West. Now I wanted to see the East.

My knowledge of Russia and the Russians was derived largely from the charmingly inconsequent White Russian émigrés of both sexes to

INTERNATIONALE

be found in the night clubs of every capital in the world and at that time particularly well represented in Paris. From these and from an occasional Soviet film shown at a little Communist cinema behind the Odeon, I had, rightly or wrongly, gained the impression that Russia must be a mysterious and highly coloured part of the world, different from other countries, and offering a better chance of adventure than most places. In the back of my mind lurked the idea that through Moscow might lie the road to Turkestan, to Samarkand, Tashkent and Bokhara, names which for me had then, and still have, an unrivalled power of attraction. I decided to apply for a transfer to Moscow.

Everyone whom I consulted about my projects told me that I was deeply mistaken. They assured me that the Moscow Embassy was a dead end. Life there would be even more sedentary and a great deal duller than life in London or Paris. I should spend long hours in a steam-heated Chancery, to which I should be confined by inclement weather, relentless superiors and the machinations of the O.G.P.U. My only relaxation would be an exhausting round of official parties at which I should meet the same tedious diplomatic colleagues again and again. I should see no Russians and gain no insight into the intricacies of Soviet policy. As for Turkestan, I should never get there. No one, they said, had been there for twenty years. Even before the revolution the Imperial Government had done their best to keep out foreigners, and now travel there was quite out of the question — especially for a British Government official. Why not stay where I was until in the normal course of things I was transferred to Rome, Washington or Brussels?

A spirit of contradiction has always, to some extent, guided my behaviour. This well-meant advice made up my mind. I was now determined to go to Russia as soon as possible. In the Private Secretaries at the Foreign Office I found surprised but ready allies, for I was the first member of the Service who had ever asked to go to such a notoriously unpleasant post, and the necessary dispositions were made with alacrity. And so, on that cold, rather dreary evening in February 1937» I found myself comfortably installed in a centrally heated first-class sleeper, travelling eastwards.

CHAPTER II

THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS

At the next day we rattled across Europe. First, across northern Germany with its flat, well-ordered fields and tidy villages. On the platforms, comfortable-looking women with flaxen-haired children; the grey green of the Reichswehr uniforms; trolleys with beer and sausages. At the frontier I presented the *laissez-passer* which I had been given by Count Welczek, the German Ambassador in Paris. 'Heil Hitler' it said. 'Heil Hitler' barked the green-uniformed frontier police, saluting with outstretched arm as they handed it back to me. By the time we reached Poland it was dark, and Warsaw passed unseen in a swirl of lights.

A little before midnight, leaving the last Polish station behind us, we plunged again into the dark pine forests. The snow was piled high on either side of the track and stretched away dimly under the trees. Suddenly, as I looked out of the window, I saw that we were coming to a high barbed-wire fence, floodlit, and broken at intervals by watch-towers from which machine guns protruded. The train slowed down and then passed through a high wooden arch with over it a large five-pointed red star. We were in Russia.

Soldiers, their bright green-peaked caps adorned with red star, hammer and sickle and their long grey greatcoats reaching almost to the heels of their soft top boots, boarded the train, and a few moments later we steamed into the frontier station of Negoreloye.

Here we were to change trains. Outside, on the platform, the intense cold took one's breath away. Then we were herded into the overpowering warmth of the Customs' building. This was a fine big, bright room, decorated with murals depicting scenes from Soviet life. Across its walls streamed a procession of prematurely happy and healthy soldiers, peasants, workers, old men, women and children, getting in the harvest, driving tractors, building houses and manipulating large and complicated machines. All round the room, in

THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS

half a dozen languages, golden letters a foot high invited the workers of the world to unite. In the comers stood pots, wrapped in crinkly pink paper, in which grew aspidistras.

It was then that I first noticed the smell, the smell which, for the next two and a half years, was to form an inescapable background to my life. It was not quite like anything that I had ever smelt before, a composite aroma compounded of various ingredient odours inextricably mingled one with another. There was always, so travellers in Imperial Russia tell me, an old Russian smell made up from the scent of black bread and sheepskin and vodka and unwashed humanity. Now to these were added the more modern smells of petrol and disinfectant and the clinging, cloying odour of Soviet soap. The resulting, slightly musty flavour pervades the whole country, penetrating every nook and cranny, from the Kremlin to the remotest hovel in Siberia. Since leaving Russia, I have smelt it once or twice again, for Russians in sufficiently large numbers seem to carry it with them abroad, and each time with that special power of evocation which smells possess, it has brought back with startling vividness the memories of those years.

I had a *laissez-passer* and the Customs formalities did not take long. Tentatively, I tried the Russian I had learnt in the Paris night clubs on the Customs officer who inspected my luggage, and found that he could understand it. Better still, I could understand what he said in reply, though some of his expressions, Soviet official jargon for the most part, were new to me. Two or three more Customs officials and frontier guards clustered round to observe the phenomenon of a foreigner who spoke even a few words of Russian. They were quite young, with tow-coloured hair and the high cheekbones and slightly flattened features of the Slav. Soon we were all laughing and joking as if we had known each other for years. An hour passed, during which nothing in particular happened; then another, during which the luggage was transferred bit by bit to the Moscow train. Looking at the clock, I saw that it was still midnight, or, rather, had become midnight once more. For we had gained (or was it lost?) two hours on crossing the frontier.

At last we boarded the train. I had been given a sleeping-compartment to myself. It was not unlike an ordinary European *wagon-lit*, but

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higher and larger and more ornate, with a kind of Edwardian magnificence. On a brass plate I found the date of its construction: 1903* The conductor too, an old man with yellow parchment skin and long drooping moustaches, was of pre-revolutionary vintage and told me that he had held his present appointment since Tsarist days. With shaking hands he brought me clean sheets, and half a tumbler of vodka, and a saucer of caviare and some black bread and a glass of sweet weak tea with lemon in it. Presently the engine gave a long, wolf-like howl and we moved off at a steady fifteen miles an hour across the flat snow-covered plain in the direction of Minsk and Moscow. In a few minutes I was in bed and asleep.

We reached Moscow early next afternoon. It was bleak and bitterly cold. Underfoot the snow had been trampled into hard grey ice. Dan Lascelles, the First Secretary, met me at the station. He had been in Russia for eighteen months and said that he found it deeply depressing.

On the way from the station we passed through streets of high modern buildings, noisy with the clang of trams. Looking down side streets, I could see cobbles and mud and tumble-down wooden shacks. Everywhere there were houses and blocks of flats in varying stages of construction and demolition, some half built, some half pulled down. Jostling crowds thronged the pavements. Their faces were for the most part pale and their clothes drab. Half the women seemed pregnant.

Suddenly we were crossing the vast expanse of the Red Square. Snow was falling. A flag, floodlit in the failing light, flapped blood-red above the Kremlin. Under the high red wall stood Lenin's massive mausoleum of dark red granite, with two sentries, motionless as statues standing on guard. A long straggling queue shuffled across the snow towards the entrance: townsfolk in dark, dingy clothes, peasant-women with handkerchiefs round their heads, peasants in felt boots and Asiatics in vast fur hats, turbans and brightly striped robes.

We stopped the car and got out. Immediately, as foreigners, we were hustled up to the head of the queue. Then, carried forward by the crowd, we swept past the guards with their fixed bayonets, through the low archway and down the steps. Inside, the subdued light of hidden electric bulbs was reflected from polished red basalt and heavy bronze. At the bottom of the steps we passed through a doorway into

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the inner chamber. Lenin lay in a glass case, mummified, his head on a little flat pillow, the lower part of his body shrouded in a tattered flag; from the roof above hung other flags, the battle honours of the Revolution; round the glass case more soldiers stood on guard. There were more lights. As we moved on towards the body, we were forced into single file. For a moment we looked down on it: yellowish skin tightly drawn across the high cheekbones and domed forehead; the broad nose; the pointed, closely trimmed beard tilted upwards; an expression of faint, inscrutable amusement. 'Move along/' said the guards, shepherding the devout, docile crowd, and we were swept onwards and upwards into the daylight and the open air.

Facing us at the far end of the square rose the Cathedral of Saint Basil, a cluster of brightly coloured, fantastically twisted, onion-shaped domes, now an anti-God Museum. We got back into the car and, crossing the frozen Moscow River, a few moments later we drove through the gates of the Embassy, formerly the house of a sugar millionaire, a large ornate building of a pale yellow colour.

Across the river, spread out before us, lay the Kremlin, a city within a city. High fortress walls of faded rose-coloured brick, broken by watch-towers, encircled the whole. From within these rose the spires and domes and pinnacles of churches and palaces, their pale walls and golden cupolas gleaming against the leaden background of the darkening sky, heavy with the threat of more snow. As we watched, a flock of grey hooded crows, started by some noise, rose from the roof of one of the palaces, flapped ponderously round, and then settled again. In between, the river lay white and frozen. Nearby a factory siren shrieked and from down the river came the hiss and thud of a pile-driver. The smell of Russia, wafted across from the city beyond the river, was stronger than ever. Later I was to see Leningrad, Peter the Great's 'window on Europe', with its sad classical beauty and its symmetrical rows of shabby baroque palaces reflected in the still, green waters of the canals. That had a look of the West. But this, this strange barbaric conglomeration of shapes and styles and colours, this, surely, was already more than half way to Asia.

Next day I started work in the Chancery, reading back files, studying

GOLDEN ROAD

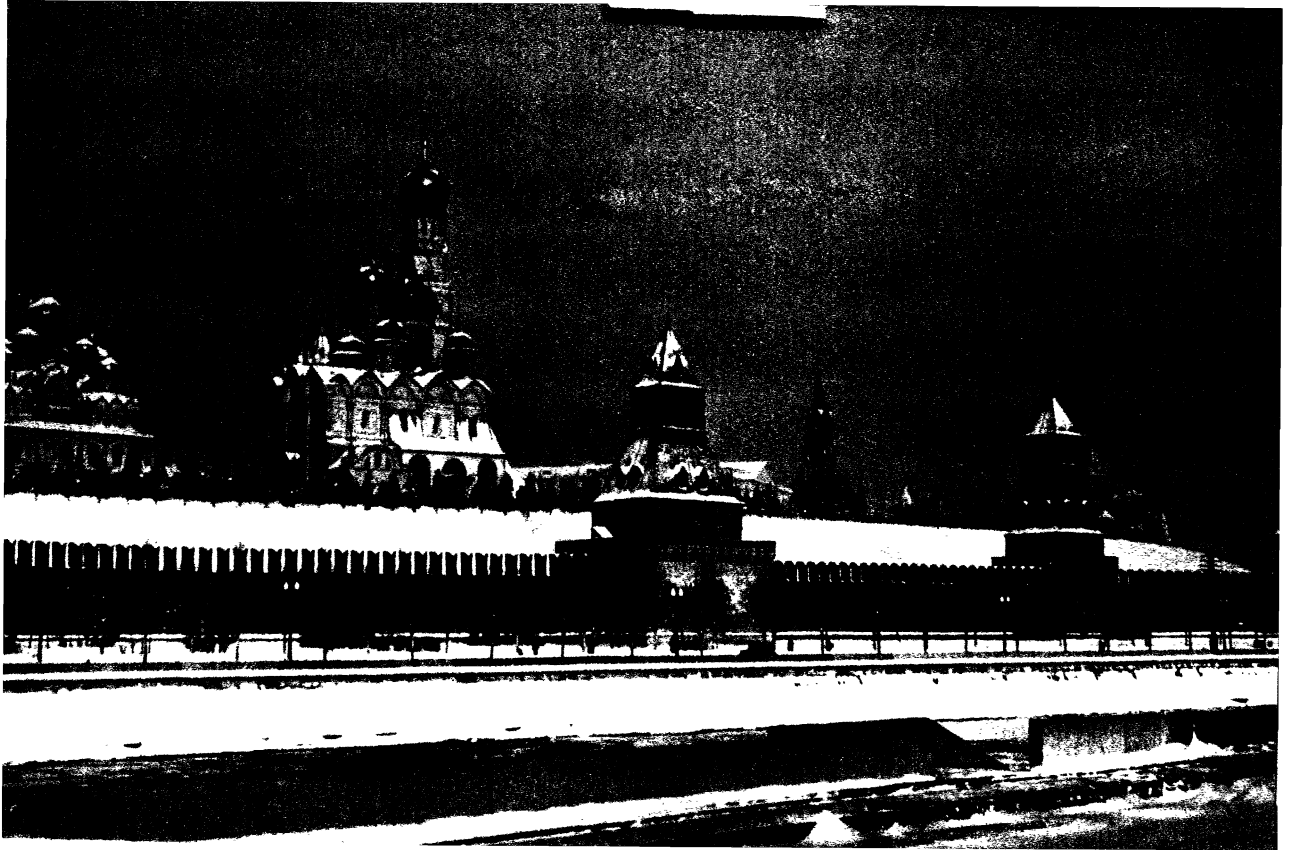
the Annual Reports and, with my gradually increasing knowledge of Russian, ploughing laboriously through the turgid columns of the Soviet press.

In Paris much of our information on the political situation had come to us from our social contacts with the people directly concerned, French politicians, journalists, civil servants and other public figures. As a Secretary of the Embassy, it had been one of my duties to keep in touch with all sorts and conditions of people, from the extreme Right to the extreme Left. Like all Frenchmen, nothing pleased them better than to be given an opportunity of expounding their views on the political situation. The only difficulty was to decide which views were worth listening to.

In Moscow things were very different. Apart from routine dealings of the strictest formality with one or two frightened officials of the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, whose attitude made it clear that they wished to have as little to do with us as possible, we had practically no contacts with Russians. Indeed, it was notoriously dangerous for Soviet citizens, even in the course of their official duties, to have any kind of dealings with foreigners, for by so doing, they were bound sooner or later to attract the attention of that ubiquitous organization, the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, or N.K.V.D.

At first some exception was made for members of the theatrical profession, actors, actresses and ballerinas, a few of whom the Authorities allowed or possibly, for reasons of their own, even encouraged to cultivate foreign diplomats, and during the first weeks after my arrival I attended a number of parties, arranged by the younger, unattached members of the diplomatic corps, and attended by some of the lesser lights of the stage and ballet. But inevitably something of a blight was cast on these proceedings by the knowledge that the charming young lady with whom one was conversing so amicably would in an hour or two be sitting down to draft a report of everything one had said to her, or, if she was unlucky, might have been arrested and be already on her way to Siberia.

Sometimes, with typical Russian hospitality and disregard for the consequences, our guests asked us to their homes, stuffy little bedrooms, which, owing to the housing shortage, they generally shared



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