



Among the Russians

Colin Thubron

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Here is a fresh perspective on the last tumultuous years of the Soviet Union and an exquisitely poetic travelogue. With a keen grasp of Russia's history, a deep appreciation for its architecture and iconography, and an inexhaustible enthusiasm for its people and its culture, Colin Thubron is the perfect guide to a country most of us will never get to know firsthand. Here, we can walk down western Russia's country roads, rest in its villages, and explore some of the most engaging cities in the world. Beautifully written and infinitely insightful, *Among the Russians* is vivid, compelling travel writing that will also appeal to readers of history and current events—and to anyone captivated by the shape and texture of one of the world's most enigmatic cultures.

Among the Russians Details

Date : Published December 26th 2000 by Harper Perennial (first published 1983)

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Author : Colin Thubron

Format : Paperback 224 pages

Genre : Travel, Cultural, Russia, Nonfiction, History, Travelogue

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From Reader Review Among the Russians for online ebook

Paolo Zanelli says

I found the writing style heavy and pompous, making reading unnecessarily slow and difficult. Also, some of the views expressed vs Russians can be condescending at times. Not a great read for me

Jan-Maat says

An OK travel book that in hindsight is less about the Russians and more a set of postcards of life in the late Soviet Union.

Thubron managed to travel individually as a one-man group. He drove a fair part of his journey and was able to stay at camp-sites, occasionally he took internal flights. What struck him was the size of the country, alien to anyone from Western Europe and the sameness of material life that gave the country a strong feeling of blandness and an irrepressible desire on the part of locals to buy his jeans or admire the interior of his Morris Minor.

Really this is more of historical interest now, not so much because of changes in Russian life so much as the country is much more open (potentially) to foreign visitors. Thubron was much more limited in the places that he was able to go and the routes that he was able to travel by than a contemporary traveller need be and perhaps that contributes to the melancholy tone of wandering around concrete tower blocks and dismal zoos full of masturbating monkeys, I think he almost liked Estonia, but maybe I am misremembering. He meets a Russian woman blissfully happy under the spiritual guidance of a Hindu sage (presumably via correspondence), Thubron doesn't much care for that either as it smacks of pure escapism!

Ivan says

I was born in the USSR in 1984 and left post-Soviet Russia in 1995 for the US.

17 years later, I read this travelogue and had mixed feelings about it because although Thubron is a great descriptive writer, his interpretation of the Soviet Union of the 1980s is somewhat simplistic and firmly rooted in Cold War-era British biases.

The name, "Among the Russians" (likely chosen to move units on the shelves) is a misnomer since he spends half his time in the Soviet republics with Belorussians, Estonians, Latvians, Georgians, Armenians, and Ukrainians. The republics had a historically strained relationship with Russia and by 1991 they seceded and became independent countries. Each of Thubron's experiences in the republics was thus unique and he could have depicted a less monolithic USSR in his essays - Soviet Georgia and Soviet Estonia are dissimilar places and he could have spent more time discussing the tensions between the republics and Russia with his interview subjects during his travels.

Throughout the book, Thubron does not hide his disapproval for the Soviet system and almost enjoys portraying the misery of the common people while dismissing anyone who appears happy or satisfied as

delusional or crooked. This black-and-white approach takes away from the complex subject that is the Soviet Union. He should go back to Putin's Russia and comment on the Russian society now that the Soviet overhang has been replaced with the parasitic traits of Western capitalism.

Towards the end of the book, Thubron gets more comfortable as he goes to Georgia, Armenia, and the Ukraine, and connects better with the characters along the way. One of them aptly captures the transience of travel: "you and I...like two people meeting in outer space." Thubron gets three stars, and a break from me, since he likely felt he ventured to outer space back in 1983.

QUOTE OF THE BOOK

"It seemed as if everything which people considered important - beliefs, systems, ideals - were fatally divisive, and that the miracle of human unity was performed instead by pop songs."

Don't underestimate the power of pop music, Colin

Vikas Datta says

A fascinating account of a meandering trip through the European part of the then Soviet Union, from the Baltics to the Black Sea and down the Caucasus, in the days when the USSR was a power to reckon with... Mr Thubron draws some memorable characterisations of various people he encountered and compelling descriptions of this enormous swathe of territory including beaches, mountains, forests and extensive plains... A most nostalgic read!

Thorlakur says

A delightful account of an Englishman abroad, more precisely a car ride through Russia and its surrounding Soviet republics in 1982. Mr. Thubron is an excellent pen, sympathetic to his subjects, but yet critical of the absurdities of the Soviet system.

Tim says

Thubron has a way of writing that few others can match, let alone the average travel writer. His knowledge of his subject is so thorough it would make a guidebook blush, but he expresses it in the most accessible way you feel like you are learning the history of Russia without ever feeling you are getting a history lesson. His writing is as incredible as his journey: a trip through Brezhnev's pre-Glasnost USSR in a British car. He gets drunk with dissidents and the agents that the KGB sets on his tail, and zig-zags across this once great country, from Ukraine up to the Baltics, and back down to the Caucasus. He spends so much time in the SSRs that it seems that "Among the Russians" is a misnomer. But despite the title, Thubron is acutely aware of the differences between Russians and the people of its republics. Being tall and speaking bad Russian he is often misidentified as an Estonian, an alter-ego he uses to his advantage.

Richard Newton says

I enjoyed this book. Thubron is a wonderful writer, although this is one of his earlier books and I don't think he had quite honed his writing style. At times he is a little over florid in descriptions.

It describes his travels around the soviet union in the early 1980s - a journey not possible now in the same way since the collapse of communism. The Russians of the title is a slight misnomer as he travels for some time amongst non-Russians such as Georgians, Armenians and Latvians who certainly don't consider themselves as Russian (and could be very upset if you called them this now).

It is more a historical view than a modern travel guide. The world has changed hugely in the 30+ years since this was written, but it is still interesting. Three things stand out - the roots of some of the current issues between Russia and its near neighbours, the sometimes impenetrable misunderstandings between Thubron and those he meets due to hugely different world viewpoints, and just the pleasure of reading a well written text. It is occasionally amusing, sometimes sad (although no where near as sad as his later writings on the ex-Soviet Union), always engaging.

As in his other books, Thubron does not always paint a picture of himself as the most engaging of people. If you need to love your author to enjoy a book, this might not work for you. And don't read this if your are looking for a modern relevant travel description as in many ways it is well out of date.

Lisa says

So, this author sounds like he swallowed a thesaurus, but overall, this was a well-formed and kind of poetic travelogue. The title is misleading. He was actually not only traveling through the Russia in 1980, but also through the Soviet states of Belarus, Georgia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Ukraine. Summary: Really great travelogue, but I didn't want to hear about his personal political opinions because it sounded like he'd just start in on people and it seemed pretty rude.

I took off one star because I didn't like his political proselytizing. Every time he talked to someone about politics, it sounded less like he was having a thoughtful political discussion about the differences between Soviet-era Communism and Western-style capitalism, and more like he was lecturing some naughty children. A British guy? Moralizing about another country's economic choices? During the Thatcher era? I don't think so. I realize his attitudes are mostly the product of his generation (Thurbron was born in 1936), and I'm not old enough to give two hoots about the Cold War, but he knew exactly where he was going and when and he had been there before, so his moralizing seems disingenuous, and I don't think he understood that some of what he had to say that was critical was kind of hurtful to the people he was saying it to. Like. Mind your own business, dude. Also, Thurbron is British. I love the Brits and all, but his country's track record is not the best. Seriously. If you don't like the government, why are you there?

Anyway. I digress. This is a really interesting look at the USSR in 1980. This is a part of the world that I don't think most Americans, even today, know much about, and it's interesting to read it because it's kind of like a time capsule from 30 years ago. So, it's overall very interesting, but rather dated.

Side note: I want to go to St. Petersburg. And Sochi. Like right now.

Ismail Qureshi says

AMONG THE RUSSIANS is a travelogue that narrates Colin Thubron's road travel through Russia and several other states of the USSR, a few years prior to its collapse.

He gives a detailed account of the geography, history, people, culture, religion, and government of Soviet Union.

AUTHOR'S JUDGMENT

The crux of his thesis is the utter failure of communism in providing an efficient and fair system of government.

He writes about a discourse with locals that denied anew the possibility of imposing selflessness on men by any system. He says:

"Their pile of accusations went to join the pyramid already in my mind: rampaging bribery, ingrained corruption. The self-accorded privileges of top party members were a rankling sore - their numberless grades of private shops, the select schools, universities and bureaucratic posts into which they inveigled their children; their permits to travel abroad, their country dachas - even their yachts."

RUTHLESS DISCIPLINE

The author felt that ruthless discipline and control by a totalitarian government aided by KGB had taken away all individuality and creativity of its people, and turned them into robots - a nation of sleep walkers.

Nikolai, a dissident professor of languages, explained the cause of communist party's intense desire for 'order'.

"It is fear," he said. Then added:

"If we had elections only ten percent would vote for this government. Tension and combat are built into the party's very heart. It can never relax because the fear comes first from within.

So the age-old Russian nightmare of encirclement - from China, Japan, NATO and America - not only creates the Russian fear, but is created by it.

War readiness is like a fever here: the aggression of a dangerous and insecure child."

COMMUNISM A RELIGION

"Communism is a religion," Nicolai said.
"It has its own dogma, it's own prophet, and even
- ugh!- it's own embalmed saint. What else is that
Lenin mausoleum?
The analogies between christianity and
communism were almost unending. Like
mediaeval Christianity, communism precluded
any fundamental speculation; its faithful walked
in blinding eternity of gospel.
It was complete, dead.

CHRISTIANITY UNDER COMMUNISM

"Christianity had a hard time under the shadow of communism," Nicolai said. "Our leaders have always worried about the church and keep a close watch.
The churches are only full of old women."
"Where are their men?" the author asked.
"Drinking probably," Nicolai answered. "That is their form of oblivion. The old women take to God, the men take to drink. Unfortunately it is easier to find a bottle of vodka than a church in Moscow.
Some churches here look as if they're working but in fact they're shut.

THE JOY OF RUSSIA

As early as the ninth century, it is said, when the Russians were choosing, which religion to embrace, they repudiated teetotal Islam with horror.
"Drinking is the joy of Russia," declared their Prince, "we just cannot do without it."

The author then depicts the present situation:
"Drunkenness accounts for over half the motor
accidents and almost all the murders in the
country. It has accelerated infant mortality and
drastically reduced the life expectancy of men,
whom it lures from their work and leaves
crumpled in the doorways of every city in the
land."

SHOPPING QUEUES

Shopping is the housewife's weariest chore. She is condemned to tramp a labyrinth in search of even simple artefacts. On an average day (it's been computed) she spends two hours in queues.

Muscovite women, and men too, prowl the shops on the lookout for anything of quality, their string bags or briefcases ready to receive the sudden arrival of Yugoslav boots or Polish bras.

In a state-planned commercial economy, insensitive to consumer demands, availability is more important to the shopper than cost. So shopping becomes a nightmare game of musical chairs in which most of the players are left out.

EQUALITY OF SEXES

Equality of sexes is the Marxist dogma.

The author noticed on a building site, typically, the foreman and the crane-operator were men, and the labourers women.

HUNGER OF FOREIGN GOODS

Most people that author came across were interested in purchasing spare items from him. They were interested in things like jeans, books, pop music, and his car. They enjoyed inspecting his car, and some of them wanted to buy it.

MIRACLE OF HUMAN UNITY

The author enjoyed a moment of joy and peace on the dance floor of an Armenian motel. It was a mixed group of Armenians, Americans, British, East Germans, and Czechs. This is what he has to say about it.

"It seemed as if everything which people considered important - beliefs, systems, ideals - were fatally divisive, and that the miracle of human unity was performed instead by pop songs."

CNCLUSION

The travelogue portrays a comprehensive picture of USSR and its people, as existed in 1980. It is a bleak picture, and the author failed to see even a tiny bit of good in Soviet Union or its people.

The portrayal may be largely accurate, but a certain amount of bias is indicated, especially as most of his information was obtained from dissidents.

The language of the narrative is mostly smooth and easy to follow. However, there are patches with unnecessary use of uncommon words.

Overall, it is an excellent read.

Jackie Côtéobsen says

I had been really looking forward to this book, and reading Thubron. I had interviewed him years ago and he was lovely. But I really had trouble with his writing style - his choice of verbs is bewildering, and it's unusual that I come across so many words that I'm not familiar with in one paragraph. This is the first time I've read anything Russian-themed since the 2016 election, because I was so disgusted (I even stopped my Russian language course). When he stops being florid and describes the locations, it's enjoyable, and I found the Caucasus section to be riveting. So, a mixed bag.

Vandita says

A perfect travel companion read when travelling in Russia. This travelogue by Colin Thubron is 'dated' in a way as it was written during his travels in the Soviet Union Russia (i.e. includes the countries which have now become independent e.g. Estonia, Lithuania and not just present day Russia) in early 1980s when the Union was under the Communist regime. Much has changed since then in Russia's place under the sun, its politics, its geographical boundaries, existential questions/ ideologies which its people search for but it is still perhaps the best travel book which goes to explain the ethos of the place and its people and helps us to understand the 'new Russia' which followed that era, better.

I loved the descriptive and evocative language that Thurbron uses and hence the book can be read as much as a piece of literature as a travelogue. You feel the pain, the shock, the fear, the freedom, the warmth - everything that Thubron feels during this trip across the massive country posing not as a writer but as a 'company director' (whatever that means!).

In my opinion, Thubron's book is unable to reach the 'great travelogue' level (rather than just 'a very good' one) due to one jarring note : that is the inherent, ingrained, ideological bias that Thubron has on Russian system of that time before stepping into the country which colours his every interaction, observation and conclusion. Unfortunately the book seems to be an expression of ratifying his strongly held views rather than an exploration of what the country may mean: the very essence of travelling ! The saving grace is that Thubron does give in and acknowledge that never will he confuse the 'state' with its 'people' after having witnessed time and time again the warmth and hospitality of Russian people. Highly recommended.

Russell says

I had higher hopes for this book than it wound up delivering. Thubron drove a British Morris car across a huge area of the Cold War-era Soviet Union, staying in campgrounds and the occasional hotel, and meeting people. Stylistically Thubron's writing was hard for me to enjoy at times; it seemed so detached, and even his meetings with dissidents, arranged through mutual friends, come off (to me) as repetitive and uninteresting. Perhaps he's reflected the general malaise of the USSR a decade before its collapse, I can't say. If you want something more lively, try out Paul Theroux's "The Great Railway Bazaar", which recounts a train journey across the USSR in the early 1970's.

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Daisy says

Glorious book written by an American journalist living in Communist Russia. Although some of it might seem a little outdated now that communism has "fallen", in reality, many of the societal issues of the Russia remain the same. Funny, weird and disturbing - a phenomenal culture shock.

Vicky Pinpin-Feinstein says

When I read the first sentence of this book which begins like this, "I had been afraid of Russia ever since I could remember," I knew that Thubron has hooked me. I'm not surprised about this because I have long been an admirer of his work. I consider him one of my favorite travel writers.

Thubron traveled through Russia in 1980, years before the fall of communism. So, reading the book after that momentous period in 1989 and onwards is like a history lesson. His delving deep into Russian daily life

in a period that can be reasonably described as bleak, gray or even dark, is something that we should know about, particularly those who are currently leaning towards fascistic and nationalist inclinations.

As much as Thubron's Russian adventures are enchanting to read, I read Thubron not so much for his adventures as for his sentences, his writing style, the way he strings those words together to craft some of the most beautiful sentences in literary nonfiction I've ever read. *Among the Russians* is not one of his best. For even better exquisite sentences, I would suggest his book, *Beyond the Wall*.

Still, if you've ever wondered what Russia was like in that period, this book is it.
