

# What Are the Russians Like?

By GERHARD WIENS

AT THE RISK of being laughed at, one laudably curious soul in my Russian class asked me one day: "Is the grass green in Russia, just as in America?" I hastened to reassure the blushing student that this question, only applied the other way round, to America, had bothered me too ever since my first English lesson in Russia, and that I had come to America to find out; and that even though I was not exactly surprised to find it green, I was relieved and pleased. Yes, the grass is green in Russia. And when a Russian cuts his finger the blood comes out red. And when he sneezes there is no mistake about it; only he spells a sneeze not "achoo!", but "apchkheel!" I let my students sneeze in any language. I let them laugh in any language: the Russian cannot say "h" and he spells laughter *kha-kha-kha*; or *khee-khee-khee* when it is a giggle; or *kho-kho-kho* when it is uproarious. But you would not mistake Russian laughter; and I did not have to change my brand of it when I came to America, even though my American friends sometimes try to curb its gusto when we see a show together and I laugh, all alone, at the wrong places. Wrong places—that's what they think. They are not Russians. Yes, there are some national differences in humor, but most things we all laugh at together.

There are many races and peoples, but only one humanity. Sunlight is one, but its spectrum has many colors. Stalin and his successors have tried to warp the Russian prism to make the whole spectrum red, but they have failed. The man in the street is still Russian and human.

But for "the man in the street" I should say "the man in the field," because to all intents and purposes the Russian peasant was, under the old Tsar, and still is, under his new tsars, the Russian people. Before the Revolution, nine out of ten Russians were peasants, and a preponderant portion of the new industrial population has come from the land. Just like the Iowa or Oklahoma farmer, the Russian peasant is conservative. The Communists have had their toughest battles with the peasants and they have not won yet, even though they have liquidated millions of them and collectivized the survivors. There is a rocklike

solidity about the Russian peasant. In the communal ownership of land he had practiced a mild form of communism long before Marx. He had learned to work together, yet keep his individuality alive. His sense of property is quite individualistic. He hates the collective farm and through passive but tenacious resistance has forced the Kremlin to let him have a haven of retreat from communism. He now is allowed to have, all to himself, to tend and to love: a vegetable plot, a cow, a pig, and some chickens. Thus fortified, he slaves less reluctantly for the collective farm.

A manifestation of the peasant's rock-like solidity is his capacity for passive resistance. This rock can be pushed and pummeled and abused but it won't move very much. And sometimes when he has been pried loose and has started to roll, he has crushed the mover in his path. The Russian peasant can act, but most of the knocks and blows of life he shrugs off with a *nichevo*—"it's nothing, it doesn't matter." In this one word is contained a large part of the Russian's philosophy of life. Just as the cheery, confident "O.K." is typically American, so the resigned, yet stoic *nichevo* is typically Russian. For every "O.K." you hear in America, there is a *nichevo* spoken in the Soviet Union. The Russians have a tremendous capacity for endurance, and this little word has been, and is, their spiritual armor.

*Nichevo* is also the expression of an almost infinite patience, a patience unbelievable to Americans. We Americans, too, have stamina and endurance, but we get so furiously impatient while enduring that we get busy and act. The Russian is willing to wait and, it would almost seem, to see how long he can endure.

This *nichevo*-philosophy sometimes, to be sure, results in resignation where no resignation is necessary. An American refuses to resign himself to an inefficient tool and forthwith improves it or invents a new one. The Russian peasant for centuries scratched his field with a wooden plow and contented himself with half the yield that a steel plow would have produced. This wooden plow, the *sokha*, is often used as the symbol of Russian backwardness. We Americans love efficiency to the point

where we waste many precious living hours in our ceaseless efforts to make perfectly good things better. But the Russian loses many equally precious living hours by using a medieval plow or tinkering around a modern tractor which his own and the factory's inefficiency has turned into a piece of junk. He loses hours and hours waiting for trains which are always late, waiting for the "big shot" commissar who is taking his time, waiting in endless lines for goods which continually keep almost out of reach. Soviet Russia has produced *stakhanovtsy*, "shock-workers," speed-demons of work, but the general inefficiency would make an American groan.

Some inefficiency is due simply to the easy-going nature of the Russian. He hates to be tied down by any merely practical matters, by any specific duty; he hates being ordered about by reality or by the clock. Actually, he loves liberty as much as the American does. But whereas the American wants freedom to strike out into the world in order to create ever new frontiers, to act, that is—the Russian asks only for plenty of *prostor*, elbow room, within which he can roam at will, but also lie down and stretch out when he feels like it. He likes to lie down and stretch out.

This love of freedom extends, as I have intimated, even to rebellion against reality (passive, perhaps, but no less rebellion). Reality was so brutally hard through the centuries of oppression and misery that denying it was often the only way for him to preserve his sanity. He denied it by refusing to see it, by writing it off as a bad job, by escaping into a dream-world, or by

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in the Ukraine, of German Mennonite parentage, and living there until he was nineteen, Dr. Wiens had a rare opportunity of learning about the Russian people, especially the peasants. At the present day, when the more we know about the Russians, the better, his interesting article is a contribution to our knowledge. Dr. Wiens is Associate Professor of Modern Languages.

both genera the flowers appear near the top of the plant and at the base of a conspicuous groove which occurs on the upper side of the tubercle. It turns out, however, that there is only one very much elongated areole on each tubercle. There is a single true *Mammillaria* which occurs in Oklahoma (*M. heyderi*) and it is known only from Jackson County. It is readily distinguished by its white flowers and the milky juice in its tubercles. The true mammillarias all have separate spine and flower-bearing areoles. Finding any members of this sub-tribe in the field requires patience and careful observation for none of them is conspicuous and they are often hidden by other vegetation.

The epiphyllum group (*Epiphyllanae*) comprises nine genera of plants most of which are tropical epiphytes. They have flat-jointed stems which resemble leaves and most of them are without spines. The flowers are often large and beautiful. The Christmas or crab-claw cactus has long been popular as a house plant. The orchid cacti are hybrids between white-flowered, night-blooming members of this group and red-flowered, day-blooming members of the genus *Heliconia*. Many horticultural varieties of orchid cacti are now on the market and their flowers rival in beauty any on earth.

The coral cacti (*Rhipsalidanae*) differ from the epiphyllums because of their very small flowers and fruits. They occur mostly as epiphytes and may be found hanging from trees or overhanging rocks in moist tropical forests. A few of them have flat-jointed stems, but others have cylindrical, pencil-like joints. Many of them lack spines and the plants therefore do not much resemble ordinary cacti. They look rather as if they ought to be in the mistletoe family. Coral cacti are most abundant in the forests of Brazil. One species, however, has been reported from Southern Florida and it is abundant in the West Indies. This is *Rhipsalis cassytha* which is possibly the only cactus native to the Old World, for it is found likewise in tropical Africa and in Ceylon.

This, then, is the cactus family, a study in variation. Exploring for its members, and growing them, has brought pleasure and healthful diversion to many plant lovers. Outside of distribution and classification, however, science still knows very little about them. Since we know relatively little, it is impossible to tell whether they may become of more economic value than they are at present. In the fields of morphology and development, physiology, and ecology, they present a nearly virgin area for investigation. Even generic and spe-

cific limits are uncertain. The logical place to conduct investigations on the family is in the American Southwest where they are abundant, not in Europe or on the East Coast of the United States. The University of Oklahoma is very favorably located in this respect. While it is not in the center of the cactus country it is readily accessible to Western Texas, Southern Arizona and New Mexico, and the extremely rich region in Central Mexico.

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getting drunk. And in his drunkenness the peasant would moan: "I am a miserable sinner. Have mercy on me, oh Lord!" Even when not drunk the Russian is a humble man. One rarely hears him boast. One is much oftener apt to hear him voice his discontent with himself. (All this Soviet bragging that has lately nauseated the world emanates from the Kremlin, not from Russia.)

Another avenue of escape leads into the dream-world of fancy which scholars call art but which to the common man everywhere is simply the urge to create a world nearer to his heart's desire. The most universal form of art in Russia is the folk song. The Russians, as we all know, are remarkable singers and so rich is the common man's store of songs that, like the nightingale, he can sing from morn till midnight without repeating himself. The range of his songs encompasses the whole soul, from deepest sorrow to keenest joy.

You may have found that Russians often talk about their "Russian soul." I believe the "Russian soul" is but a human soul and when a Russian intellectual begins to talk of his soul I feel uneasy. I am so afraid it is merely a pose. Yet the Russian peasant, too, likes the word "soul," and there is all the warmth of the heart in his talk. The Russian is not sentimental: yet he enjoys to feel his feelings, to turn them over in his mind and to invite his neighbors to share them. He does this without ostentation, sincerely, naturally, almost naïvely. In literature, this has produced many works in which there is no "action" but only mood, where the heart is like a harp that sings in the wind. A story of Chekhov's comes to mind which only a Russian could have written: *Toska*.<sup>1</sup> The old coachman has lost his only son; he needs to tell people his grief but nobody will listen, at least not long enough. He finally goes to the stable and starts talking to his horse, the gentle mare. And while she is contentedly chewing her hay he tells her all. Both the humor and the pathos of the scene are genuine

and their effect becomes overpowering through their simultaneity.

These same sensitive Russians can turn around and become hard and cruel. Superficial observers have cited this as an example of a lack of balance and stability in the Russian character, or even of the "dual character" of the Russians. I cannot believe that the Russian character is any more dual than ours or anybody else's. I would rather say only that the Russian pendulum makes quite a hefty swing in both directions.

In this brief attempt at a characterization of the Russians I have made some sweeping generalizations. But there are infinite variations from type. You yourself will have to know a Russian or two, or two hundred, before you can say with some certainty: "This is Russian, this is not." And since for various reasons, including an iron curtain, few of you are likely ever to go and study the Russians in the flesh, I urge you to do the next best thing: read them! All Russia lives in the pages of her classics. Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Gorky, Chekhov—remember these names. They are Russian writers. But they speak a universal language.

<sup>1</sup> The title defies the translator, at least this one, but to the Russian soul it may mean one or all of the following: grief, sadness, melancholy, anguish, agony, anxiety, distress, yearning, longing, dejection, boredom.

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egalitarian, harmonious, and self-less community, Christian as well as socialist, classless by consent rather than force. True, the foundation of Jules Guesde's *Parti Ouvrière Français* in 1882 and more obviously the *Parti Communiste Français* in 1920 reveals a healthy, dynamic, and dangerous Marxist strain, but its significance must not be overrated. Even after the disheartening May days of 1871 when the Paris commune, both bourgeois and socialist in composition, had succumbed to the deadly volleys loosened by the forces of peace and political respectability, even then the clamor of certain socialist voices for social harmony continued.

To this effect Charles Beslay, a prominent Commune, wrote in *La Vérité sur la Commune* (1878): "The bourgeois ought to know that it is in its interest to extend a hand to the workers who ask nothing but to join them in the spirit of brotherhood." Charles Péguy, born two years after Commune blood had washed the pavements of Paris, writing when the passions engendered by the Dreyfus affair glowed red hot,