
OLD WORLD, NEW WORLD

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SANTHA RAMA RAU: A FOOTNOTE TO HISTORY?

Abstract: This article analyzes Santha Rama Rau's 1959 travelogue, *My Russian Journey*, and places it in the context of Soviet-American relations in the early decades of the Cold War. Rau, an eminent Indian American novelist, was commissioned by the literary travel magazine, *Holiday*, to write articles on the Soviet Union in the late 1950s. She was recruited for her literary ability, but her personal relations with important personalities in the United States and India gave her an unusual degree of access to members of the Soviet cultural elite. Rau's leisurely travels through different parts of the Soviet Union resulted in a new kind of travel account of everyday life in the Soviet Union. I analyze three major themes in *My Russian Journey*: the problem of Soviet censorship, descriptions of elite lifestyles in the Soviet Union, and a comparison of Soviet and Indian national identity. I argue that the publication of Rau's *My Russian Journey* marked an important milestone in Soviet American relations that was mediated through India.

Keywords: Cold War, national identity, travel literature, USA, India, USSR, Santha Rama Rau, Soviet elites.

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Чой ЧЭТТЕРДЖИ

САНТА РАМА РАУ: ПРИМЕЧАНИЕ К ИСТОРИИ?

Аннотация: В статье анализируется тревелог Санты Рама Рау «Мое путешествие в Россию» (1959) в контексте советско-американских отношений первых десятилетий холодной войны. В конце 1950-х гг. литературный журнал о путешествиях *Holiday* заказал выдающейся американской романистке индийского происхождения Рау статьи о Советском Союзе. Выбор пал на нее, поскольку она обладала литературным даром, а также была лично знакома с заметными фигурами в США и Индии, что открывало ей доступ к советской культурной элите. Неспешные путешествия Рау по разным уголкам Советского Союза вылились в новый вид путевых заметок о повседневной жизни в СССР. В статье анализируются три основные темы тревелога Санты Рама Рау — проблема советской цензуры, описание образа жизни советской элиты и сравнение советской и индийской национальной идентичности, выдвигается и доказывается тезис о том, что публикация «Моего путешествия в Россию» Рау ознаменовала собой важную веху в советско-американских отношениях, которые осуществлялись при посредничестве Индии.

Ключевые слова: холодная война, национальная идентичность, литература путешествий, США, Индия, СССР, Санта Рама Рау, советская элита.

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Many years ago, Lynn Mally, a perceptive scholar of Soviet culture, had gifted me a copy of Santha Rama Rau's travelogue, *My Russian Journey*. It lay unread and forgotten in the pile of books in a room that I fondly call my study but that family members refer to as the "graveyard of books," behind my back. I was co-editing a collection of articles on the American fascination with Russia and the Soviet Union at that time, and during my deep dive into the history of this massive subject, I had little time to consider the work of an Indian novelist far removed from the subject, or so I believed. It turned out that I was utterly mistaken, and Rama Rau's travelogue was very germane to Soviet-American relations in the 1950s and 1960s as I will demonstrate in the first part of the essay. Moreover, until recently, I had pigeonholed Rama Rau as an Indian writer who happened to live abroad. I was still far from understanding the national and transnational implications of her Indian identity, and in the second part of the essay, I will elaborate on my findings on the subject.

A decade later, in 2020, Dr. Hari Vasudevan, my professor at Calcutta University, passed away from covid-19 complications. The loss was acute and while writing Dr. Vasudevan's obituary¹, one of the more painful projects in my life, I learned about the immense range of his activities: scholarly and political, that played a key role in sustaining Indo-Russian relations after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. When I was asked to contribute an article on a memorial volume for Dr. Vasudevan, I thought that an analysis of Santha Rama Rau's *My Russian Journey* would be an appropriate topic. Each had a Russian connection, even if it was with differing degrees of intensity. Rau and Vasudevan were from South India, born into well-known families with a distinguished record of public service. Rau was educated at Wellesley College, and Hari at Cambridge, but they were upper-class and Anglophile Indians whose interconnected destinies created the ecology of Nehruvian India. I was not surprised to learn that each had a family home at the Colaba Beach in Bombay. Rau had written a very perceptive series of articles on Kenya, then a Crown possession in British East Africa², while Vasudevan went to school in post-independence

¹ "A Scholar and a Gentleman," *Frontline*, June 5, 2000. <https://frontline.thehindu.com/other/obituary/article31680762.ece>

² Rama Rau Santha, "Life Goes on Under the Mau Mau's Shadow," *New York Times*, July 19, 1953. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1953/07/19/110067317.html?pageNumber=149>; and "the Trial of Jomo Kenyatta," *The Reporter*, March 16, 1964: 12–23.

Nairobi in the 1960s³. I also learned that the cosmopolitan and worldly Vasudevan was a true nationalist at heart, dedicated to serving India at home and burnishing its reputation abroad in a self-critical way that Santha Rama Rau had also aspired to a few decades earlier.

Indo-Russian Relations

I skimmed the first few pages of Rau's travelogue and was captivated by her engaging descriptions of Leningrad and its literary ecology. Rau, a sophisticated world traveler believed that it was one of the loveliest cities in Europe. I had secretly thought so for most of my adult life but was often silent when my friends sang the praises of Vienna, and Paris. The project seemed to be off to a propitious start given our shared love of Leningrad and Russian literature and I put aside Rau's book and started the serious work of reading through the many, many volumes on Indo-Russian relations, in an attempt to place her book in time and context. I was separated from Rau by time, class, and education, but I hoped to find some commonalities in our attitudes to Russia, in our responses to Russian culture, and our interactions with Russians. Having lived in the United States for most of my adult life and being immersed in the study of the Soviet Union, I always felt uninformed about recent developments in the discipline of Indian history. And Indo-Russian relations seemed a promising place to learn not only about the Soviet Union but also about the country of my birth.

As I read through the many publications on the subject, I began to dimly realize that relations connecting Russia and India were deep and broad and seemed to transcend the categories of trade and commerce, developmental economics, and military and diplomatic relations [Indo-Russian Relations 2012; Vasudevan 2010; Chandra 2017]. The spread of communist ideology through political exchanges was an important part of Indo-Soviet relations [Datta Gupta 2006; Vasudevan 2017]. While students went to the Soviet Union to study medicine and the hard sciences in the second part of the twentieth century, many Indians continued to be fascinated by Russian high culture, especially literary masterpieces [Balasubramaniam 2013]. Since Russian classics were mostly read in English translation, Indians considered Russians to be an integral part of European culture, even if Western Europeans had serious misgivings on this score [Wolffe 1994]. Indians, like their Russian counterparts, turned their novelists and artists

³ For Vasudevan's biography see the website: <https://harivasudevan.com/hari-sankar-vasudevan-biography>.

into sources of prophecy and moral philosophy⁴. Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and to a lesser extent, Gorky fit the bill in many ways, and we see echoes of Tolstoy's heroine, Kitty, from *Anna Karenina*, in Rama Rau's best novel, *Remember the House* (1954). Like Kitty, who decides to marry the idealistic landowner Levin and shun the imported French ways that were diluting the content of Russian culture, Rau's heroine, Indira, chooses a traditional Indian husband, Hari, over the seductions of cosmopolitan life in Bombay. But Rau, unlike Indira, chose the pleasures of footloose travel and life in the diaspora.

Scholars and literati in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union were interested in Indian religions, history, art, literature, and folk culture. Vostokovedeniia or the scholarly study of the East was suffused with orientalist overtones in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, but Russian orientalism was different from that generated in the West for a simple reason [Vasudevan 2011]. Russia, although a part of Europe, was placed lower in the gradient of civilization by the West because of its proximity to Asia [Schimmelpenninck 2010]. As a result, the Russian Empire had less confidence in the superiority of their civilization than their counterparts in the French and British Empires. But in the Soviet period, the technocratic elite believed that they had generated the best blueprints for equitable progress throughout the world and there was a concerted effort to transfer the paradigms of socialist modernity and the planned economy to India. These ideas found an appreciative audience at the highest levels of governance. On the other side, the permissive beach culture of Goa, and Bollywood films and music found appreciative audiences in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia [Rajagopalan 2009]. The persistence of folk culture in India, and the mass politics of Hinduism, to be found in the practices of yoga and the organizations such as ISCKON and the Ramakrishna Mission, continued to attract people throughout the Russian empire [Wishon 2013].

⁴ In her memoirs, Rau's mother, Lady Dhanvanthi Rau (President of the International Planned Parenthood Federation and tireless activist for women's causes), mentions Lillian Ulanowsky, who was hired as a companion to her daughters, Premila and Santha in England. Lillian's father came from Ukraine / Poland and moved to Vienna in the early part of the twentieth century. Lillian came as a Jewish refugee to England during the 1930s fleeing the Nazis. She was a musician, and her brother was an accompanist to the famous Lotte Lehman. Although Rau does not mention Lillian, it is tempting to speculate that she instilled some ideas about Russian culture in the young Santha Rama Rau (Rau, Dhanvanthi. *An Inheritance. The Memoirs of Dhanvanthi Rau*. New York: Harper and Row, 1977: 182–184).

Two Paths to Russia: Russia through the West and Russia via the “West”

Indo-Russian relations were built on two axes: one road ran through the countries to the northwest of undivided India, and the other, facilitated by the availability of Russian literature and political thought in translation, snaked through Western Europe. In the pre-modern era, swift Mongol armies on horseback had opened up travel and trade paths connecting Southern Europe to India and linked the many lands that lay in between through military conquest. The Silk Roads facilitated the journey of the fifteenth-century traveler, Afanasii Nikitin, from Tver to India⁵. Later, Indian merchants from Punjab, Sindh, Rajasthan, and Gujarat established trading communities not only in the cities of the Khanate of Bukhara in Central Asia, but also in Astrakhan and Orenburg in southwest Russia in collaboration with Pashtun tribal groups. They operated from bases in Kandahar and Kabul. From southern Russia merchant groups traveled up north to the famous trade fairs that were held in Nizhny Novgorod and even visited cities as far afield as Arkhangelsk, trading grain, gems, horses, and textiles along the way. Arup Banerji’s rich and nuanced work [Banerji 2011] shows that the British East India company used the extensive networks that had been established between the northwestern states of India, and Afghanistan, Persia, Central Asia, Trans-Caucasus, and Southern Russia during the inception of the Mughal Empire to further trade relations and gather intelligence. Ultimately, the desire for trade, commerce, and territory was going to lock the expanding British Empire into the “Great Game” with a Russian Empire that was pushing into Asia. The geopolitics of this encounter persists today albeit in different forms and with few additional players.

In the late nineteenth century, the northwestern territories of India also became an important corridor that allowed the ingress of Russian revolutionary thought and literature. The new trade in political ideas created a firestorm in much of the Indian subcontinent that still smolders. Kazi Nazrul, the famous revolutionary poet of Bengal, learned about the Russian Revolution of 1917 while serving in the British colonial forces in modern-day Pakistan [Das 2018: 55; Qureshi 2008; Ahmad 1967]. It served as the inspiration for many of Nazrul’s works including the magnificent poem, *Bidrohi (The Revolutionary)* that inspired millions. The powerful amalgamation of pan-Islamic and socialist thought suffused the works of

⁵ [Vasudevan 2014] and Vasudevan, Hari. *In the Footsteps of Afanasii Nikitin*, documentary film: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PYyGhuJ7V4&t=2111s>

another famous poet, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, who was later to receive the Lenin Prize for literature in 1962 [Chattopadhyay 2019; Chattopadhyay 2011; Zaitseva 2021]. M.N. Roy tried to build an army of transnational revolutionaries from a base in Tashkent in the early 1920s, even though he had initially traveled to Russia via Western Europe (and the Americas) [Vasudevan 2019].

By the late nineteenth century, cities in Western Europe, especially London and Paris, served as points where Indian nationalists such as Madam Bhikaji Cama learned about nihilism, socialism, and bomb-making techniques from Russian counterparts [Bose 1971; Silvestri 2019]. After the First World War, in the 1920s and 1930s, Indian revolutionaries absorbed the varieties of communism in European cities, especially in Berlin. Many, including Rabindranath Tagore, Jawaharlal Nehru, M.N. Roy, and Virendranath Chattopadhyaya made their pilgrimage to Moscow after sojourning in Western Europe [Chatterjee 2017]. Chattopadhyaya was arrested and executed at the height of Stalin's purge in 1937 in the Soviet Union. The northwestern frontier also allowed Indian revolutionaries to escape the long arm of British law in India. Udham Singh, Subhash Chandra Bose, and many others escaped via Afghanistan, and traveled through the Soviet Union to reach Western Europe in the inter-war period. Bose was able to build the Indian National Army with help of the Nazis in Berlin. But after the division of India in 1947, the passage through the centuries-old land corridor became severely constrained. Nehru's commitments to the principles of non-alignment notwithstanding, Indo-Soviet relations deepened, and the Soviet planned economy became an object of fascination among Indian economists who wanted to bring about economic and social progress in a planned manner [Engerman 2018]. Over time, the Soviet Union became one of the biggest suppliers of armaments to India, a relationship that persists today.

Soviet-American Relations

Throughout my bibliographic tour through Indo-Russian relations, I looked in vain for Santha Rama Rau, and sought clues about her relationship to Russia. Surprisingly, her name did not appear in this context⁶. In considerations of Rau's work, scholars primarily see her as an Indian writer in the West, representing India for western audiences in a Cold War era in a

⁶ S.K. Desai's insightful work [Desai 1976] seemed to be the sole exception to the rule.

postcolonial world. What image of India is to be found in her works? Was she an important or a minor Indian writer? Is she an elite cosmopolitan (is there any other kind?), a diasporic Indian, or a transnational Indian? Should her work be included in surveys of Indian literature, and was she an early precursor of postcolonial writing? [Burton 2007; Mukherjee, Chattopadhyay 2020; Sabin 2012].

While the secondary literature helped me understand Rau's oeuvre at a deeper level, unfortunately, it did not further my project. Since it is impossible to understand an individual or a text without the historical background, I turned to the Soviet-American context for clues about Rau's Russian journey. I was luckier in this instance and soon realized that Rau's *My Russian Journey* had nothing to do with Indo-Soviet relations but was intended for the sophisticated and affluent American readers of the *Holiday*, a literary travel magazine that published her articles on the Soviet Union. Earlier, Rau had written articles on India for *Holiday*, and they had been collected and published as a book, *This is India* (1955). Travel at that time was not for the masses and nor did they consume travel literature. Travel, not the more pedestrian tourism that was going to succeed it, was a past-time for a cosmopolitan class whose members had the leisure and the means to travel the world. They also possessed the culture and education necessary to appreciate the meanings of their journeys, or so they believed. At *Holiday*, Rau was in elevated company as the magazine featured high-quality travel writing about the far-flung corners the world: from Cuba to Zanzibar, from Iowa to Indonesia. The journal commandeered the talents of famous writers including Colette, William Faulkner, Joan Didion, Graham Greene, and Ernest Hemingway among many other luminaries [Fiori 2019]. *Holiday* was the public face of a cultured American cosmopolitanism, one that American policymakers were anxious to project during the Cold War. Very early in the text Rau signals to her well-traveled and presumably jaded readers that the Soviet Union might be the last "undiscovered" place left on earth. According to her English friend with whom Rau shares her travel plans, "'I can see why you might want to go,' she said, 'it is just about the only place that is *abroad* anymore'." [Rama Rau 1959: 5].

Since the publication of her first book, *Home to India* (1945), at the precocious age of twenty-two, Rau had been recognized as a literary figure in the United States. Her debut novel received complimentary reviews in a series of important publications ranging from the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Harpers' Magazine*, *Los Angeles Times*, to the *Daily Boston Globe* among others, and these helped secure Rau's reputation. Rau was an

odd choice to cover the Soviet Union given she had little expertise in the subject matter, but she had a secret weapon, an expert in residence whose formidable knowledge of Russian high culture helped her navigate the upper crust of the Soviet Union. Faubion Bowers, Rau's husband and travel companion in the Soviet Union not only knew Russian, but his expertise in the theatrical arts gave the couple an unusual degree of access to Soviet cultural establishment⁷.

Bowers was for the most part an autodidact despite stints at Columbia University and the Juilliard Graduate School of Music in New York. He had effortlessly mastered a series of difficult languages including, Japanese, Russian, Chinese, French, and Malay. Bowers was a fascinating and complex personality. He was a gay man who married Rau and fathered a son with her [Leiter 2011]. He also had a colorful past. He had served General MacArthur as an interpreter and an aide de camp during the American occupation of Japan after the Second World War. Bowers' official title was Assistant Military Secretary and despite his close ties to high officialdom, he was critical of American imperial policies. Bowers was subsequently appointed as the official censor of Japanese theater, but he thwarted attempts to suppress Japanese art forms. He was involved in saving the famed Kabuki theater in Japan despite its intensely feudal and pre-modern content that alone should have marked it for extermination during the American drive for modernization. Bowers' irreverent attitude towards authority coupled with his deep knowledge of Japanese culture helped legitimize the American occupation of Japan, so much so that even today many regard Bowers as an important commentator on Japanese culture [Shiro 1999].

Given Bowers' experiences during the American occupation of Japan, he was extremely well-placed to understand the relationship between culture and power and navigate the politics of the Soviet arts bureaucracy. The Soviet authorities were also interested in cultivating Santha Rama Rau not only because of her avowed liberalism and commitment to expanding international relations, but because of her India connections. They were well aware that Rau's family was politically powerful and that her father, Sir Benegal Rama Rau, was the governor of the Reserve Bank of India, her mother, Lady Dhanvanti Rau, was Jawaharlal Nehru's cousin, and her uncle, Sir Benegal Narsing Rau, a noted jurist, had served as the Indian

⁷ GA RF (State Archive of the Russian Federation). F. 5283 (VOKS), op. 21, ed. khr. 273 (2). P. 110–111, and op. 14, ed. khr. 621.

representative to the Security Council of the United Nations [Magnúsdóttir 2019, Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy 2010].

Bowers and Rau's visit to the Soviet Union coincided with the new phase of the Cold War that started with the death of Stalin in 1953 and the onset of the Eisenhower Presidency⁸. The Soviet Youth Festival of 1957 signaled to the world that the Soviet Union was open for business and especially keen to welcome visitors and tourists, especially young people. Soviet officials were also trying to adjust their socialist propaganda for the changing context of the post-World War II era. But they knew that the promotion of high culture was a key selling point for their side, one that had appealed to the western intelligentsia since the 1920s. Unlike the interwar period when the USSR and the US competed about the building of bridges, factories, and dams, the new competition in the post- Second World War era was about rising living standards. American consumer culture for the masses became a formidable model across the globe, and it threatened to undo the claims that only socialism could raise the living standards of ordinary people. The new American strategy was revealed at the American Exhibition at Sokolniki Park, Moscow in 1959 where Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev held the famous "Kitchen Debates." The main themes of the American exhibition were cars, fashion, toys, consumer goods, contemporary art, books, and capitalism [Reid 2008]. In spite of the ongoing tensions caused by the Suez Crisis and the Hungarian uprising of 1956, both countries were anxious to move beyond the dark days of late Stalinism when relations had hit their lowest point, and this was [Rosenberg 2005]⁹.

In 1958 the American pianist, Van Cliburn, won the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow and his stellar performance marked an important milestone in the Cultural Cold War. While the United States was an innovator in creating a popular culture that spread around the world like wildfire, it was at a competitive disadvantage with

⁸ According to Enver Mamedov, editor of the Soviet journal, *SSSR*, who happened to meet Rau and Bowers at a conference in Columbia University in April 1957 and then invited them for dinner, Rau was a friend of Owen Lattimore, the famous scholar of China and Central Asia who had been denounced as a Russian agent by Joseph McCarthy in 1950. GA RF (State Archive of the Russian Federation). F. 5283 (VOKS), op. 14, ed. khr. 621 (1). P. 147–151. Gratitude to Elena Yushkova for sharing this document with me that has detailed information of the Rau and Bowers that was collected during Mamedov's dinner with the couple.

⁹ Thanks to Dr. Barbara Walker for sharing her unpublished manuscript, *A War of Experts: How the US Hacked Soviet System in the Cold War and Both Sides Lost*.

the Soviet Union when it came to high culture. There was no American counterpart to Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Pushkin, or Tchaikovsky! But here again, various state and non-state agencies worked together in the United States to cobble together two distinct advantages: one, the United States officially subsumed all West European cultural achievements under the rubric of the “West,” and it became an important sponsor of many different western art forms [Caute 2003]. Second, the United States became the official champion of Soviet artists, novelists, thinkers, scientists, cultural and sports figures and sought to preserve their legacy from the depredations of the Soviet state. From arranging the publication of Boris Pasternak’s famous novel, *Dr. Zhivago*, in the West, to smuggling out the bulk of Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s literary archive, the United States played a crucial role in sustaining and promoting Soviet dissident culture [Finn, Couvée 2014; Richmond 2003]. The Eisenhower Administration vastly increased the number of cultural, educational, and scientific exchanges with the Soviet Union. Bowers’ extended research trip into Soviet ballet, theater, folk art performances, variety theater, children’s drama, and the circus happened in the context of this cultural Cold War. And the Rau-Bowers family was an excellent advertisement of the American values of affluence, education, culture, and cosmopolitanism [Bowers 1959; Bowers 1996].

My Russian Journey

By the time *My Russian Journey* was published in 1959, it was competing with publications on the Soviet Union written by old Russia hands and eminent journalists such as John Gunther (a good friend of Rau’s), Dorothy Thompson, and Louis Fischer, as well as new commentators, Sally Belfrage, Adlai Stevenson, Marvin Kalb, and Zinaida Schakovskoy [Barghoorn 1960: 268–335]. John Gunther’s book on Russia was number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list in 1959 and served as a mini encyclopedia on the country. The highly readable text was useful for those who sought in-depth knowledge about the Soviet Union following Stalin’s death in 1953 [Gunther 1958]. Rau on the other hand did not aim to be either comprehensive or scholarly, and like Sally Belfrage and Adlai Stevenson, she described conversations with everyday people in order to convey the mood of the populace in the post-Stalin era.

By avoiding the established categories of western travel literature on the Soviet Union, Rau created a non-specialist text that was centered on her interactions with Soviet citizens from many different ranks of

life. One looked in vain for descriptions of communist ideology or party politics, and instead, Rau described meals in private homes and restaurants, shopping trips, nightlife, cultural events, and magnificent destinations such as the Peterhof Palace, the Winter Palace, Tolstoy's home in Khamovniki, Moscow, and the Trinity Monastery at Zagorsk. Rau's vignettes were designed to demystify the Soviet Union for the readers of *Holiday* and break the ineluctable association between the country and an austere communist ideology. She presented a Soviet Union that was different enough to be exotic but familiar enough so that one could contemplate a visit there.

While Rau is not particularly adept at sociological analysis, or the sorting of people into well-defined categories, she excelled in the art of description. Boris, Shura, Irina, and an array of characters vividly come to life in chance encounters at hotels, concerts, tourist attractions, and the street itself. We watch the acquaintances turn into friends. We learn from Rau that the Soviet youth are not merely ideological mouthpieces for the regime but are complex characters in their own right. Some like Shura desire the good life: he wants to amass consumer goods, enjoy meals at expensive restaurants, and participate in American popular culture through an imaginative re-enactment of the imagined pleasures of Broadway in Moscow. While Shura belongs to the *stilyagi* (stylish young people who dress like westerners despite official condemnation), Rau also meet Vanya and Igor, *fartsovschiki*, or illegal traders in forbidden western goods who offer to buy Rau and Bowers' old clothes and shoes [Furst 2010]. Others like the highly cultured Sasha in Lenin-grad are proud that the state has restored the architectural treasures of St. Petersburg after the concerted Nazi bombing during World War II. To Rau's surprise, he believes that the Russian cultural heritage needs to be protected even though he, Sasha, lives in a dilapidated apartment that is yet to be renovated many years after the end of the war. Young people speak freely for the most part, but even when they are critical of certain aspects of the Soviet Union, including Stalin's terror, Rau detects a subtext of patriotism and an abiding love for the country in almost every conversation. Rau, being from a poor country herself, is particularly careful to avoid the heavy-handed condemnation of poverty that was so ubiquitous in the American travel writing on the Soviet Union and elsewhere. In the sections that follow, I analyze three themes that are present in Rau's text: censorship, descriptions of elite lifestyles, and a comparison of Soviet and Indian national identity.

Dostoevsky and Censorship

American readers looking for dreadful tales of bureaucratic malfeasance, censorship, communist party politics, terror, and material poverty, the staple of media reporting on the Soviet Union, were bound to be disappointed in *My Russian Journey*. At the same time, Rau did not whitewash the blank spots of Soviet history. She couched her criticisms in a series of literary allusions that consumers of high culture would appreciate. Rau's writing was often Aesopian, so much so as it appeared as if she was writing with the Soviet censor in mind¹⁰. Early in her book, she touches on the question of censorship by bringing up the subject of Dostoevsky with her prickly and suspicious Intourist (Soviet Travel Agency) guide, Svetlana [Pachmuss 1962; Shneidman 1975]. Rau, a deep admirer of Dostoevsky, is incensed that she cannot find his apartment listed in any of the Leningrad tourist guides. Strangely, all her otherwise friendly Soviet friends seem disinclined to help her with her quest. Svetlana is very reluctant to give Rau any information on Dostoevsky, blandly noting that the writer was mentally unbalanced. After the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, Dostoyevsky's literature was subject to a torrent of official abuse. Soviet authorities criticized his pessimistic worldview and for promoting a cult of suffering instead of revolutionary heroism. Dostoevsky's reactionary political views were particularly suspect in the revolutionary decades of the 1920s and 1930s. And in the 1940s under the leadership of the ferocious cultural ideologue, Andrei Zhdanov, Dostoevsky was denounced as an enemy of the proletariat and a lackey of Wall Street. Soviet critics labored to accommodate Dostoevsky's complex thinking within the teleology of official ideology. Since he had been partially rehabilitated only in 1956, it is not surprising that Svetlana does her best to make Rau believe that her admiration of Dostoevsky's writings was entirely misplaced.

While Dostoevsky's works were not exactly forbidden by 1957, they were not promoted either. Rau foregrounds the knotty problem of state censorship by describing her cat and mouse conversations with Svetlana about Dostoevsky's literature. She does so with wit and insight. Svetlana finally gives in to Rau's relentless requests and produces an address for Dostoevsky's apartment. But then, to Rau's dismay, Svetlana insists on taking them to a poor part of Leningrad in the official Zim limousine pro-

¹⁰ It is also important to point out that Rau had experience of American censorship during the Second Red Scare unleashed by Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s when many of her left-wing and liberal friends and colleagues, including Owen Lattimore, faced political persecution [Newman 2021: 458].

vided by the Intourist. Svetlana points to a run-down building in a narrow alley and says that since the apartment is unmarked, there is nothing for them to “see.” Rau describes the unpainted building, the shabby and suspicious slum children, and the canal, “a stretch of grimy, utilitarian water,” in words that are very evocative of Dostoevsky’s prose. “...I don’t know just what I had expected to see, but standing there in the pale, misty light so typical of Leningrad, a light that carries its own sense of desolation, I had to keep reminding myself, this is what Dostoevsky looked out on when he was writing, this quiet dull scene” [Rama Rau 1959: 46–47].

Rau, who has been re-reading *The Insulted and Injured*,” is determined to find Dostoevsky’s apartment and she later returns to the same place accompanied by Bowers. This time they come on foot so as not to arouse suspicions among the locals. They not only find Dostoevsky’s apartment, but the occupants, three elderly ladies (shades of Chekov), invite them to come inside. While Rau sees little evidence of Dostoevsky’s chaotic presence in the neat and cramped apartment that the ladies share with their daughter’s family, she finds what she imagines to be the same views that Dostoevsky probably saw. “The dingy courtyard, the dark thin little figures of children playing, the Leningrad evening closing in” [Rama Rau 1959: 66]. The Russian women are hospitable and generously share their memories of Dostoevsky, but they too are bewildered by the fact that someone would come all the way from India and the United States just to see Dostoevsky’s apartment! According to them, Tolstoy was an extraordinary writer as he described the fabulous lives of the aristocracy. Dostoevsky, on the other hand, was unremarkable as he wrote of “everyday, *ordinary* things and people.” Rau’s protestations about Dostoevsky’s genius fail to find a response in her audience. Rau does not remark on the extraordinary correspondence between the official view of Dostoevsky and those held by the three elderly women. Were they afraid to express themselves truthfully to a foreigner? Or was Dostoevsky simply unpopular among the “ordinary people” “the insulted and injured” who still inhabited the dreary world of his literary fiction as late as 1957?

Rau forces her readers to grapple with a different kind of thinking about the Soviet Union, one that takes them out of their preconceptions about the country. In Rau’s deft prose, Russians break through the constraining mold of Homo Sovieticus that was being established by the venerable scholars of the totalitarian school of Soviet historiography. Russians are neither heroic dissidents, nor corrupt apparatchiks. Nor are they simply subjects who have internalized the disciplinary apparatus of Soviet

ideology [Chatterjee, Petrone 2008]. Rau allows her subjects to speak for themselves, and as a result, her characters appear as complex individuals who exhibit a range of emotions, sometimes contradictory, and unsuitable for sound bites about the Soviet Union [Hazanov 2016].

Rau's originality became a liability and American reviewers were unsure about how to treat her text, especially since it was so different from other published works on the subject¹¹. All agreed that Rau's travelogue was extremely well-written and that she had a genuine gift for cultivating friendships in distant lands. But many were disdainful about her complete lack of expertise on the subject matter. Some eminent academic reviewers such as Alexander Dallin and Ralph Fischer drew attention to her mis-translations of Russian words, and the mistakes she made in the recounting of historical dates [Dallin 1959; Fisher 1959]. Other critics complained about the length of her book and her extravagant and unjustified praise of the beauties of Leningrad. Since Rau was considered to be an "expert" on India because of the accident of birth and nationality, many reviewers felt that she should not have ventured into the unknown territory of the Soviet Union at all. But Rau's lack of expertise on the Soviet Union and ignorance about the prescribed conventions that governed the literature on the subject was perhaps her biggest asset. Instead of adhering to the canons of American Sovietology, Rau read the Soviet Union through Russian literary culture. Perhaps that is why *My Russian Journey* is still worth reading today.

The "Privileged"

Rau's was an unusual journey in unusual circumstances. Unlike the ordinary tourist who was speedily escorted through the approved travel sites of the Soviet Union by operatives from the Intourist, Rau's family spent almost three months in Russia, visiting Leningrad, Moscow, and Tashkent with little official supervision. They stayed at hotels such as the Astoria in Leningrad, and the Metropole in Moscow. Accompanying Rau and Bowers was their five-year-old son, Jai, and his African American nurse, Ruth Camm. Rau, Bowers, father, and son, and Camm, constituted an affluent, educated, and multiracial American family; the perfect face that the United States could present to the world during the Cold War. By their very existence, the Rau-Bowers family belied the extensive Soviet

¹¹ Charles Poore, "Books of The Times," *New York Times*, Mar 3, 1959. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/114637743/A703EF1EBBCF41B4PQ/7?accountid=10352>.

propaganda that racism and white supremacy were endemic in the United States [Baldwin 2002; O'Rourke 2019]. But everywhere that Rau went people commented on Jai's beautiful black eyes, and strangers plied the mixed-race child with food, gifts, and an outpouring of affection. In Rau's interactions with Soviet people, she finds a commitment to internationalism and an acceptance of racial, ethnic, and national difference; qualities that sophisticated American audiences could also relate to.

Not only were Rau and Bowers affluent and had the means and leisure to travel aimlessly to the utter mystification of their hosts, but they were also extremely well connected with access to the higher reaches of the Soviet cultural bureaucracy. Bowers was able to interview Galina Ulanova, one of the greatest ballerinas of the twentieth century, thanks to the intervention of a "friend" Eduard Aleksandrovich Ivanian, head of the Department on Western Europe and the United States in the Soviet Ministry of Culture. They were able to see multiple shows at the Bolshoi Theater and Ivanian even arranged an interview with the Director of the famed Moscow Art Theater (MKhAT), Alexander Solodovnikov. Rau, because of her friendship with the Indian ambassador to the Soviet Union, Krishna Menon, was invited to many diplomatic events, including a party in honor of Eleanor Roosevelt who happened to be visiting Moscow at the same time.

Rau had met Bowers in Japan while acting as an unofficial hostess for her father, Sir Benegal Rama Rau, the first Indian ambassador to Japan. Subsequently, Bowers and Rau traveled to China and various countries in Southeast Asia. Bowers' linguistic abilities helped Rau gather materials for her book, *East of Home* (1950). This extended trip was Rau's first introduction to communist politics in Asia and she witnessed the incredible poverty that underlay these political movements. But there could not be a bigger difference between these unstable and pre-modern societies that were mired in revolutionary conflict while trying to break free of European colonialism, and the hierarchical, urbanized, and a bourgeois Soviet Union. She describes her suite at the Astoria in Leningrad, "... I looked around at the solid respectability of the mahogany furniture, of plush tablecloths and curtains, of the plethora of meaningless bits of handmade lace — antimacassars, lace covers for pillows on the bed, lace doilies on the dressing table, under the brass lamp-stands, the marble inkpot, the mysterious marble-and silver ornament on the desk; all the cut glass, pin trays, pen trays, ash trays, decanters, glasses, bottles, carafes, and chandeliers. It was a thoroughly Victorian atmosphere. There was only one word that captured

the look and feeling of those rooms — “bourgeois — . . . , I was reminded of the curious product of the of the first revolution to be fought against the bourgeois ideal — the bourgeois ideal” [Rama Rau 1959: 5–6]¹².

Rau found the same bourgeois aesthetic repeated in the airy studio of a famous Soviet painter in Moscow. The hands of the painter’s wife were adorned with flashing diamonds, and she served the visitors, imported French cognac. “Looking around the comfortable room, the upholstered furniture, the fringed lampshades, I wondered . . . that ‘the people’s art’ was increasingly in the hands of people who were entrenching themselves more firmly every day into a thoroughly bourgeois way of life” [Rama Rau 1959: 167; Pleasures in Socialism 2010].

To her further surprise, Rau found that some members of the Soviet elite had even managed to reprise the manners and mores of the erstwhile aristocracy. In Moscow, Rau is invited to visit the elegant and sunlit apartment of Anna Kalma, a popular and highly compensated writer of romantic biographies. A maid, dressed in a black dress with a white apron, who has been with the family for many years, lets Rau into a well-appointed living room furnished it with eighteenth and nineteenth-century antiques. Rau describes it as “it had a causal, rather worn elegance, like exiled aristocracy” [Rama Rau 1959: 150]. Unlike the palpably bourgeois painter’s wife, Kalma exudes a sophistication that would not be out of place on Park Avenue in New York. With her unruly hair, smartly cut suit, and air of amused confidence, Kalma shows Rau the “beautiful treasures” in her apartment like any wealthy woman would. “They were beautiful all right, the Russian antiques, the delicate china ornaments, the leather-bound books, most of all the really extraordinary carpet, fine, faded, exquisitely designed, draped over the back of the sofa on which we sat. Beautiful and beautifully kept” [Rama Rau 1959: 151–152].

Kalma explains the system of privilege that allowed the cultural elite of the Soviet Union to enjoy spacious apartments in the city, build dachas in the countryside, and possess exurban homes in the upscale suburb of Vnukovo, just outside of Moscow. At the end of the visit, after a sumptuous tea of ham, sausage, pressed caviar, salads, and many kinds of bread and preserves, the live-in maid, who remains nameless throughout the visit, sets out antique silver cups and a cut-glass decanter. Kalma cor-

¹² Rau anticipated some of the famous themes contained in Vera Dunham’s landmark study [Dunham 1976]. See Dunham’s brilliant descriptions of fringed orange lampshades as the hallmark of Soviet *meshchantsvo* (people with philistine and banal artistic taste and sense); and Svetlana Boym [Boym 1994].

dially invites Rau to try the cherry wine that is made with “cherries from our estate,” without the slightest hint of self-consciousness. Kalma feels fortunate about her good life. And other members of the Soviet elite, who Rau refers to as the “Privileged,” seem equally indifferent to the paradox of their wealthy lifestyles in a country that has been liberated for the masses. Rau, who is well aware of the existence of the Indian elite (of whom she is a member of) in the ocean of poverty of post-independence India, refrains from the caustic judgement or irony that the occasion demands. She also knows that the readers of the *Holiday* would be extremely interested in the lives of their counterparts in the Soviet Union. Apart from a few mildly critical sentences, Rau is content with providing details of the life of the “Privileged.” Kalma, like Svetlana, the Intourist agent, are neither good nor evil, they are characters who exemplify the complexities of Soviet life. While I have no definitive proof, it is possible that Rau’s depictions of bourgeois interiors, the material aspirations of the young, and her indifference to communist ideology were unwelcome in the Soviet Union. After all, these were some of the reasons that the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. It wasn’t merely happenstance that when Soviet officials demanded that a list of American books be removed from the exhibition at Sokolniki Park in 1959, Rau’s *My Russian Journey* was included as an item of proscription¹³.

Asia and Russia

In the last section of her journey, Rau travels to Tashkent and Samarkand, fabled stops on the Silk Road that had connected Asia with Europe for many centuries. Rau feels at home in the Tashkent market, surrounded by vendors selling fresh and locally grown produce. She marvels at the varieties of onions for sale and is curious to try the new leafy greens and vegetables, many of them from China. The voluble bartering, the energetic conversations, “the flirting” even the presence of beggars, all reminded Rau of the great Asian bazaar, a staple in many civilizations in this part of the world. She praises the sweet melons, the juicy grapes, and enjoys her first glass of kumiss, a drink made of fermented mare’s milk that is popular throughout Central Asia. The display of spices: “coriander, turmeric, onion seed, red chilies, green chilies, saffron, a black sweetish spice called *korakand*, and many others were displayed in bowls and baskets, in jars

¹³ Frankel Max, “Russians Screen Books. 100 US Volumes Removed From show in Moscow,” *New York Times*, July 25, 1959. Reprinted in: *Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the Congress*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1959: 14432–14433.

and open trays” [Rama Rau 1959: 267], where the vendor will create a mix to your particular specifications was very familiar to someone from India. The grilled kababs served on freshly baked naan, the mounds of fresh walnuts for sale, the clatter of donkey and horse-drawn carts, the ubiquitous flies, all powerfully remind Rau of India, a country that is already in the distant rear-view mirror. Their guide, Hafiz, tells them about the donkey crisis in Tashkent caused by Soviet efforts to modernize the city. Donkeys were banned since they were not considered to be progressive, and the inhabitants of the city were urged to travel by bus. Hafiz is resentful of Soviet efforts to change their culture, but an elderly Uzbek man tells Rau that Moscow is too dependent on cotton exports from Uzbekistan to press hard with its model of cultural transformation. Rau sees Soviet imperialism at work in every corner of Tashkent even though she does not name it.

Rau had traveled to Russia via the West, through English language translations of European Russian literature, but on her visit to the ruins in Samarkand she talks about the historical linkages between India and Central Asia. She talks about Tammerlane, or Timur-i-leng (the lame) as he was known in Asia, who built the splendid Bibi Khanum Mosque to commemorate his victory in Delhi, India. After the brutal sack of Delhi, Timur used elephants from India to haul the massive stones for the construction of Bibi Khanum. Rau forgets to mention that Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire in India, was a descendant of Timur. Rau finds that Tashkent despite its one million residents “has the air of a small provincial town that could be as easily in northern India, northwestern China, or Afghanistan” [Rama Rau 1959: 265], but it is obvious that she knows little about the historical connections that wind through Northern Indian, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Central Asia, and north to Russia.

Rau keeps finding Asiatic themes in Russian high culture. She sees shows at the Bolshoi, the operas, *Ruslan and Ludmilla* and *Prince Igor*, the ballets, *The Fountains of Bakchisarai* and *Gayanne* that contain stories about Russia’s sufferings at the hands of Asian conquerors. For centuries, Asian invasions threatened to obliterate the nascent cultures that developed in European Russia. This induces her to reflect on the comparative histories of Russia and India and analyze the effects that imperial aggression has had on the respective cultures. Like Russia, India has been invaded multiple times by conquerors who desired her wealth, land, and people. According to Rau, India has never been able to mount a successful defense against the invaders. “For the most part we absorbed our conquerors, accepted some changes from them, and in turn made them into Indians” [Rama Rau 1959:

183]. But since India was able to integrate most of the conquerors, with the sole exception of the British who eventually retreated, they are for the most part open and accepting of difference. Russians too have seen their cities sacked, their capital destroyed, and have been invaded from the East and the West. "...But the Russians' urge has always been to drive the invaders out, to guard their frontiers, to preserve the integrity of our "beloved land" [Rama Rau 1959: 183–184]. Instead of following the American pattern of national assimilation where people tend to leave their identity behind and accept a new one, the Russians built a union of separate republics. Russians were keen to preserve their cultural identity within the political arrangement of the Soviet Union rather than create a single national entity where their culture would be subsumed. Since Russian culture has been preserved at great cost through the centuries, Rau finds that almost everybody she meets think it is worth defending.

Rau ends the section on this enigmatic note without offering judgment on which is the better strategy, India's model of tolerant cosmopolitanism, or Russia's defensive nationalism. It was a question that was very close to her heart since Rau spent most of her writing career thinking about how to formulate an appropriate answer to the question of home. Two of her novels have "home" in their titles (*Home to India*, and *East of Home*), a third contains the word, "house" (*Remember the House*). Rau also wrote the screenplay for David Lean's film, *Passage to India*. The film was based on E.M. Forster's eponymous novel in which the characters set in motion a series of horrific events while searching for the "real India." Rau, the elite cosmopolitan, who traveled the world, ultimately found a home in the United States. She built a noteworthy literary career, married twice, raised a son, and perhaps even planted a tree. But she never stopped thinking about her "beloved land": an occupational hazard, an emotional subtext, a cultural source that enriched her imagination.

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