Russian odyssey

Simon Roberts goes in search of the Motherland

Mother Russia

Simon Roberts took a gamble when he and his wife rented out their house and set off across Russia for a year. But the risk paid dividends, finds Diane Smyth.

‘Russia cannot be grasped with the mind, or measured in feet and inches, for she has a special character in Russia one can only believe,’ Fyodor Tyutchev wrote these lines in 1866, but as Simon Roberts’ photobook Motherland proves, it’s a sentiment just as pertinent today. His photographs show the bewildering variety of people and places that this vast country encompasses, from familiar blue-eyed sailors photographed in the Urals to the Mongolian physiognomies of the Even reindeer herders in the far Eastern province of Kamchatka.

But underlying the country and, he hopes, his book, is Russia’s sense of spiritual unity. ‘Russians carry with them an innate sense of the history of the motherland and, through it, feel inextricably connected to each other,’ Roberts writes in his afterword. ‘This nebulous spirituality—defining it is impossible—this Russianness, is elusive yet all pervasive.’

‘It’s a huge country but it’s very much seen as one place,’ he tells BJP. ‘The national pride is something much more powerful than Rule Britannia. It’s somehow less arrogant, much more sorrowful and spiritual—I don’t know why I keep coming back to that word but I do. It’s like it’s almost painful, like a yearning of the heart.’

East to West

Roberts and his wife, Sarah, travelled around Russia for a whole year to complete the project, covering 75,000km and crossing 11 time zones. They also researched the trip for 18 months before they even got there, and their thoroughness is evident in the sheer variety of places they visited, from power stations to army bases. The depth of the couple’s knowledge can also be seen in the picture captions that pepper the book, drawing on facts and quotes taken from the country’s long history and culture. But although the couple’s extensive research underpinned the project, Roberts says that its success is also down to its spontaneity.

‘I really wanted to show another side to Russia so it was really important that some of the trip was unplanned,’ he says. ‘When you’re trying to document a place you really need to get immersed in it.’
over your misconceptions, but that's very difficult to do, and it's especially hard if you're pre-planning the journey. So we deliberately left at least half of the itinerary spontaneous. We could turn up in a place that we really wanted to go to, but we didn't have criteria for how long we would stay there. If someone suggested, "Why don't you go to Magadan?" or "Come here with us," we could just do it. It was almost in a good way, in that we weren't just going to the places we'd read about.

"Everyone knows about St Petersburg, everyone knows about the Trans-Siberian Express. I wanted to move away from those places. In places like Chechnya, for example, you find both Babushkas working in bombarded shells and glamorous women in the reconstructed part of town. Most people who think about Chechnya don't think about the reconstruction, so it was important to show both sides. I don't want to gloss over the problems, and I suppose politically you can say that Russia isn't in a very good place. But this project was very much about a more spiritual concept of Russia, about the idea of the Motherland."

**Everyday people**
The couple stayed in peoples' houses, rather than hotels, and found that doing so helped them find people and places that they would never have otherwise come across, all of which helped them illuminate the enigma of the Motherland. One family invited the couple to the All Russia Ballroom Dance competition, for example, a competition that was outlawed as bourgeois under Soviet rule. Through an American woman living in Chechnya they hooked up with Pavel Lipatov, a Russian who camps in the wilderness for a month every summer to reconnect with his sense of affinity with the landscape.

"It's linked to the whole idea of the fertile black earth, and the land where he came from," says Roberts, and this is an idea that Rosamund Bertell explores further in her illuminating introduction to the book. "The deepest source of patriotism in Russia... lies not in pride in national achievements or military glory, but in love for the motherland, whose most visible expression is the extraordinary, almost physical attachment which Russians have for their landscape," she writes. An attachment which they are often at a loss to fathom."

**Wide shots**
This affinity with the land informed Roberts' approach to his work. Using a Mamiya 67, he shot landscape photographs with a 65mm lens, and portraits in the street where he found people, trying to capture as much detail about them and their homeland as possible. The
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