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THE MOTHERLAND

Travelling some 75,000 kilometres across Russia, photographer Simon Roberts spent a year capturing the spirit of a country undergoing monumental change.
IN JULY 2004, award-winning photographer Simon Roberts set off on an ambitious journey across Russia. Over the course of a year, he would travel 75,000 kilometres and visit 735 cities, towns and villages. He travelled by bus, train, plane, by reindeer, horse and armoured convoy. Accompanied by his wife, who had studied Russian at university, 33-year-old Roberts had a mission to capture the spirit of the country 15 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He didn’t want to make a political statement but rather explore a country undergoing monumental change.

Starting in the Russian Far East and travelling through the Siberian provinces, up the Kola peninsula and across to Kaliningrad before making his way down to the Northern Caucasus, the Altai mountains and along the Volga river, Roberts crossed eleven time zones and took some 5,000 photographs. On his return to England, he edited them down to 150 for Motherland, a stunning photographic book that, at times, seems to look into the very heart of Russia.

The book features simple portraits and stark images of the landscape; Roberts was curious about both and felt that one reflected the other. “Patriotism in Russia is so much richer than in Europe. Russians believe their native land to be an exceptional place. They convey an optimism that I soon came to share.” He talks of how Russians see their home, their rodina – the place where one is born, a place evocative of the nation’s soul. “They carry with them an innate sense of the history of the motherland; it’s what connects them to each other. It’s really hard to define... it’s not about national achievements or military glory but love for the motherland.”

Roberts had been fascinated by Russia since his school days – it was remote, exotic – and had learned about it while studying geography at Sheffield University. Yet he admits to feelings of anxiety before setting off, “I was going into regions where there might be a Communist idea that there was something to be afraid of. I was pleasantly surprised: most people were very open to what I was doing and happy to be photographed. They certainly didn’t seem scared of what I might be trying to say.”

After travelling around sub-Saharan Africa, Israel and Palestine for publications including The Guardian, the Sunday Times, Esquire and the Monde, he maintains that Russia is one of the earliest and safest countries in which he has worked under the post-Communist infrastructure ensures the trains still arrive on time and his only brush with ‘danger’ was a pick pocket. “I have to say that I’ve had more trouble in America.”

Growing up with stark images of Communism, Roberts’s great adventure forced him to re-evaluate his notion of Russia. “It struck me how well developed some of the Siberian cities are. They are growing extremely fast; you can find sushi restaurants, bars and clubs. Even in the smallest towns there are internet cafés full of kids accessing websites from across the world.” He also saw proof of an emerging middle class – and one that is looking increasingly west. “People used to have money stashed under their beds. Now they are investing in property. There is a still a huge divide between the rich and poor but it’s not as bad as it was. Like, for example, is growing at a huge rate.”

Roberts hopes that Motherland has captured something of Russia, the people and their rodina. “Ultimately these images are a celebration of a great country. I hope they deepen our understanding of a place and its people that were once remote and mysterious.”

Motherland is published by Chris Beetles Ltd (£25) and images are on show at Photolaion gallery (17a Electric Lane, London SW18 2LA) until 25 May. For more information visit www.motherlandbook.com