

“Go East, Mr. Douglas...”

Bill Douglas needed money. He always needed money. And now, reeling from a very expensive divorce, and with a new wife, he needed even more money. Douglas had come from a modest upbringing, the son of an itinerant preacher who had ended up in the Pacific northwest. He worked his way through a local college—after getting the first year free on a scholarship—and then crossed the country to New York, where he worked his way through law school. Douglas advanced very quickly in the legal profession, but his expenses regularly outstripped his income. He borrowed. He did one-off writing jobs. But he could never seem to get ahead of his expenditures.

Then an answer presented itself. As an attorney, thereafter as a government official, and finally as a judge, Douglas found that he was particularly good at simplifying and explaining technical issues and putting them in vivid laymen’s terms. That is, he wrote fast and he wrote well for popular audiences. His first significant commercial writing venture was a loosely autobiographical account—with an emphasis on the loose—of his early years in Yakima, Washington and his outdoor experiences in the nearby mountains. *Of Men and Mountains* became a modest bestseller and led the judge to embark on a series of travel books. Douglas would make trips each summer, when court was not in session, using the advances from publishers or magazines to staunch—only temporarily—the flow of red ink that always seemed to follow him. *Strange Lands and Friendly People* came out a year after his mountain man book and covered a trip to the Middle East, India, and Greece. It was followed by *Beyond the High Himalayas* and *North from Malaya*.

That a wordsmith judge might moonlight as a travel writer is not exceptional. That a Justice of the US Supreme Court, William O. Douglas, the bête noire of Wall Street when he was SEC Chairman in the late 1930s, the youngest member of the Supreme Court, by far, when he was appointed in 1939, would choose to spend six weeks wandering around the Soviet Union in 1955, at the height of the Cold War, writing a travelogue, now seems utterly inconceivable.

Douglas’s *Russia Journey* came out from Doubleday early the following year, after photos and a write up appeared in *Look* magazine, which had sponsored the trip.<sup>1</sup> I came upon the work while reviewing travelers’ accounts of Soviet Russia. Having read many such books decades earlier when I was a student of Soviet history, I revisited them recently and observed how—now that I enjoyed some distance—these accounts were often far more about the authors than they were about the subject. Of course, authors always bring their biases and perspectives to their works, and they cannot help but be framed by the times in which they write. Douglas’s account of his trip to the Soviet Union in 1955 is not only not an exception, but also an instance in which the author’s presence almost obscures the topic at hand.

Despite being a Supreme Court justice, Douglas took great liberties in the narratives that he crafted about his own history. His lifestory underwent constant revision, with frequent moments of exaggeration and fabrication. So what we encounter about Douglas in *Russia Journey* should be taken with a grain of salt, including the very beginning of the tale. In the foreword, Douglas claims to have waited five years to receive a visa. So many decades after the fact—Douglas died in 1980—it is hard to verify that claim, but if we take it at face value, it makes Douglas’s rambles even more stunning. For if Douglas had actually applied for a visa in February of 1951, it was at a time when Stalin was still in power and the post-war conflict between the superpowers was nearing its height. Berlin had been blockaded by the Soviets in 1948; NATO was formed and the Soviets tested their atomic bomb in 1949; the Korean War started the next year. Within the US itself, McCarthyism was raging. There were other

post-war visitors to the Soviet Union—usually diplomats and full-time journalists—who wrote up their experiences, but a moonlighting Supreme Court judge is just hard to fathom. (That Douglas’s first travel book came out only in 1951 also calls into question the early start of the Russian visa timeline.)

By 1955, the scenario had become modestly less fantastical. Stalin died in March 1953. Two years later, Khrushchev was in the process of consolidating power in a decidedly less Stalinistic manner. Although the Warsaw Pact had been formed in May of 1955, two months later, East and West met in Geneva for the first major superpower summit of the Cold War. The “Big 4” powers had come together to reduce tensions on many fronts. Although little of significance emerged from the meetings beyond agreeing that thermonuclear war was a bad idea, the greater nominal amity associated with the mid 1950s may have made it easier for Douglas to get his visa and actually go on the trip. He embarked on the adventure in August.

Before we get to the trip itself, there is a backstory to the backstory. Making the journey even odder is the presence of 29-year-old Robert Kennedy. At the time, Kennedy was an attorney working for the Senate Democrats. His father, the Kennedy patriarch, Joseph P., had known Douglas for decades—they had both headed the SEC in the 1930s—and according to Douglas’s biographer, Joe Kennedy asked Douglas if Bobby Kennedy could tag along to get some foreign policy experience. Douglas agreed, and likely regretted it thereafter. Kennedy turned out to be a bad traveling companion. Hostile at every turn to the Soviets he met, he made it clear that he was there in the spirit of judgment, not inquiry. He also came back and wrote up his thoughts and sold his pictures to *US News and World Report*, beating Douglas to publication and undermining the Justice’s deal with *Look* magazine.<sup>2</sup>

Douglas’s account was unusual in another respect in that it was not focused on the usual Leningrad-Moscow-Kiev axis. Instead, following on from his prior trips to South Asia, Douglas arranged to enter the Soviet Union via Iran and the Caspian Sea, spent most of his time in Soviet Central Asia, and only finished his itinerary with the obligatory visit to the capitals. His genuine interest in the Central Asian republics—how they were experiencing enforced modernity—and his sincere affection for the people he met there distinguishes *Russia Journey* from its peers at the time.

So what would you expect from a US Supreme Court Justice’s account of a visit to the Soviet Union in 1955? Even if you were familiar with Douglas’s colorful personality and liberal-leaning politics, it is unlikely that you would imagine the mash up that is *Russian Journey*. Douglas does not abide by whatever soft rules existed for travel writers at the time. He was a big personality and assumed that his books would sell because of who he was, not what he wrote. That only turned out to be sporadically true—his books were hit and miss affairs—but his *Russia Journal* shows this “few filters” approach.

The opening of the book dispenses with any pretense of distance from the topic. He directly likens the terrain and climate of Central Asia to that of his youth in the Pacific Northwest. Saying he felt “strangely at home,” Douglas then claims that this background leads him to have a greater understanding of the challenges that the people in the Soviet Union face. And this leads to a point made in one form or the other at the beginning, end, and frequently in the middle of *Russian Journey*: “war can never settle the differences between the two nations—that Russia like the United States is too powerful, too vast, too far flung, ever to be conquered and garrisoned by a victorious army... The only settlement is a political one. That problem is, indeed, the great challenge of this, the last half of the twentieth century.” (7) Over and over again, Douglas challenges the prevailing ideological rhetoric of the Cold War, and he ends the

work calling explicitly for a “political truce with Russia” (243) involving disarmament, a non-aggression treaty, and acknowledgement of the status quo in terms of spheres of influence.

Douglas’s sympathetic stance is expressed not in adulation of the Soviet system itself, but in an adulation of the people, particularly those in the Central Asian republics, and in the absence of a meaningful critique of the system. His description of Soviet living, perhaps not surprisingly, reads sometimes like a legal brief. It is rather dry, about travel conditions, housing conditions, food conditions, industrial conditions, etc. Douglas either conducted or more likely had someone else conduct a lot of research on his behalf because we are treated to an endless stream of data about salaries, tractors, refrigerators, cars, students, etc. The detailed statistics sound a great deal like the torrent of often tendentious data that came from official Soviet sources at that time. Perhaps the most interesting chapter is that on the police, courts and the law, where Douglas could offer a particular perspective.

Douglas’s broader agenda appears to be to levelize, normalize, and de-exoticize the Soviet Union for American readers. His approach could not be more different from that of the Marquis de Custine’s travel notes to Russia being popularized in the United States just a few years earlier (and the topic of my initial foray into these travelogues.)<sup>3</sup> Custine and his interpreters offer 1950s readers all (negative) judgment and no facts. Douglas does almost the opposite: mostly the “facts” and an implied acceptance of the system that produced them. While Douglas frequently references the brutality of the Soviet system, he suggests that that is mostly in the past, a relic of the Stalinist system that is fading rapidly. In contrast, Douglas’s sympathy to the Soviet Union comes out explicitly in periodic remarks such as the “The five-year plan suits the Russian character.” (39) While these comments say nothing of the Soviet Union, its people, or planned economies, they say quite a bit about William Douglas the iconoclast.

In short, for whatever reason, Douglas is out there, in line with the spirit of the Geneva summit, but not much else. He also seems unaware that nothing in the visit to the Soviet Union of a sitting US Supreme Court Justice (and former potential Vice Presidential candidate) would have happened by accident. He accords the good show put on for him at every stop to the generosity of spirit of the peoples that he met, especially those from Central Asia. That a show is being put on for him especially either eludes Douglas or he just does not care.

From the perspective of 65 years, the book has little to recommend itself for the student of Soviet history. Instead, the backstory of how it got written, and by whom, makes *Russian Journal* of interest.

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<sup>1</sup> William O. Douglas, *Russian Journey* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1956)

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Allen Murphy, *Wild Bill: The Legend and Life of William O. Douglas* (New York: Random House, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Peris, “Custiniana: The many histories of a single trip to Russia 180 years ago, and why it matters today,” forthcoming. The relevant version of Custine’s travelogue was published in the US in 1951 under the title *Journey for Our Time*.