

Tourist with a film camera

Georg Oddner

in the Soviet Union

by **Sune Bechmann Pedersen**



The first western tourists in Moscow after the Second World War. The man carries a Sohlman Conversation Guide phrasebook. PHOTO: GEORG ODDNER



A Swedish tourist lends his camera to a local in Stalingrad.

PHOTO: GEORG ODDNER

abstract

This essay presents the little-known story of the first western package tour to the postwar Soviet Union along with never-before-seen photographs from the journey. It also introduces the digitized Oddner archive, which contains an abundance of visual sources on the Soviet Union of 1955.

KEYWORDS: Tourism, photography, cold war, Russia, Ukraine.

On June 5, 1955, the Swedish daily *Aftonbladet* ran a sensational headline story: The Soviet Union would open for package tours! After years of isolation, Khrushchev allowed leisure travelers to come and experience the world's largest country. The Soviet Union had not allowed regular tourist visits since 1939, but now ordinary Swedes could obtain a ticket. The Swedish travel company Reso was among the first western travel agencies to land a deal with Intourist, obtaining permission to send a hundred tourists on package tours that same summer. The weekly magazine *Vecko-Journalen* spotted the opportunity to produce a unique travel reportage and dispatched their star reporter Marianne Höök, accompanied by the young photographer Georg Oddner (1923–2007). This assignment ensured the Swedish photographer of Russian descent lasting fame. Two of Oddner's best-known works, *Den dansande matrosen* [The dancing sailor] and *Mannen med boken* [The man with the book] stem from this trip. *Den dansande matrosen* first featured in *Vecko-Journalen*, whose extensive presentation of Höök's reportage and Oddner's photography spanned no less than six consecutive issues in August and September 1955. Photos from the trip have since been printed and exhibited numerous times in Sweden and abroad. The exhibited works, however, only make for a small fraction of the thousands of photographs Oddner took during the trip.

Parting the Curtain

When looking back from our media saturated world, it is hard to comprehend the information vacuum in the West surrounding the Soviet Union in the early 1950s. Churchill's musings on Russia as "a riddle wrapped in mystery inside an enigma" still resonated fifteen years on. The memoirs of Lennart Petri, Sweden's deputy chief of mission in Moscow from 1955 to 1958, recount how he would report about the most trivial observations. "Any information fit to increase the knowledge about the Soviet system and its population's support was of significance to the part of the world that did not share the Soviet values."¹ Contemporary western newspapers lamented the country's inaccessibility and any indication that a change was underway immediately became headline news in the early Cold War.²

To be sure, the Soviet Union was never entirely shut off to the Western world. Delegations of politicians, businessmen, and fellow travelers shuttled back and forth with increased intensity in the early 1950s. Artists, experts, and athletes from the West were also received in ever greater numbers following Stalin's death in March 1953. Still, the opening of the country to everyone who could afford the hefty travel expenses in the early summer of 1955 marked a symbolic step towards improved East–West relations and foreshadowed the optimistic "spirit of Geneva" apparent after the "Big Four" summit of July that year.³

THE HONOR OF PUSHING open the Soviet border for western tourists is sometimes ascribed to Gabriel Reiner, owner of the New York-based travel bureau Cosmos Travel. During a chance encounter with the Soviet leadership at the US embassy in Moscow on July 4, 1955, the Russian-speaking Reiner explained how the unfavorable currency exchange rate and the lengthy visa application procedure kept US tourists at bay. According to Reiner, Nikita Khrushchev proclaimed, "tourism is a wonderful thing" and a meeting with Intourist was immediately set up the next morning. Reiner thus secured an agreement, which rendered a



Swedish tourists at the Neva River opposite Leningrad's Peter and Paul Fortress.

PHOTO: GEORG ODDNER

trip affordable for others than the select few by reducing the sky-high cost of room and board by a third.⁴ While this anecdote may well be true, it downplays the fact that western travel agents had already courted Intourist for a while. Lennart Petri mentions the arrival in Moscow of travel agents from Stockholm, Oslo, and Copenhagen on May 12, 1955, and Ivan Ohlson, Reso's CEO, reported on the successful results of "months-long negotiations" with Intourist at a meeting on June 7, 1955, two days after Reso had broken the news about a breakthrough to the Swedish press.⁵ Curiously, Ohlson returned to the Soviet capital to conclude Reso's agreement with Intourist on the very same evening that Reiner attended the US Fourth of July reception.⁶ In other words, Cosmos Travel appears to have merely gate crashed the final stage of the negotiations between Intourist and other western agencies, although the backing Reiner secured from the Soviet leadership may have accelerated the process and generally improved the terms for the western agencies.

Travel-writing tourists

Reso's first tour was organized in such a haste that there was barely any time to advertise it. Already on August 1, just weeks after the deal with Intourist had been finalized, a pioneering contingent of ten Swedes departed for a 17-day journey around the enormous country. The contemporary press called the travelers "tourists", but the participants were by no means looking for leisure and recreation. Aside from compulsory stops at the Kremlin and the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad, the program contained visits to Moscow's agricultural exhibition, a collective farm, a hospital, and the miserable everyday life among the ruins of Stalingrad. In fact, half of the travelers were critical journalists seeking unique first-hand experiences of the contem-

porary Soviet Union. Aside from Höök and Oddner, they were Henning "Heng" Österberg of the daily *Stockholmstidningen*, Gits Olsson of the photo magazine *Se*, and Åke Appelgren, who wrote for Reso's magazine *Fritiden* and also served as the group's Swedish guide. The participation of well-known reporters boosted the media interest in the journey. Colleagues from the press interviewed and photographed the party at Stockholm's airport before departure and returned again to gather the travelers'

first impressions upon their arrival.⁷ In the meantime, *Stockholmstidningen* had published ten dispatches by Österberg during the trip, all of which became front page news.

The interviews and the travel accounts provide glimpses of the brief moment in the Cold War—between the Geneva summit and the Warsaw Pact's crushing of the Hungarian revolution the following year—when the Soviet Union appeared astonishingly amicable and welcoming. The Swedes were aware of the infamous Soviet "hospitality techniques" traditionally deployed to present the country in the best light to foreign visitors and they were on

the lookout for any signs of Potemkin villages.⁸ At the end of the day, however, the tourists found that their hosts did little to mask the state of affairs. The journalists reported how, to their surprise, the hosts allowed them to walk about freely, photograph virtually everywhere, and talk to everybody they met. As Olsson wrote in the first of his seven reportages

We saw factories, kolkhozes, flats, hospitals, theatres, cinemas [...] we met peasants, factory workers, students, waiters, drivers, doctors, engineers. Everybody dared to speak with foreigners. We met some colorful types.⁹

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Tourists overlook Kyiv in the background, while Oddner foregrounds scrap ignored by the tourist gaze.

PHOTO: GEORG ODDNER



This photo was intended to be used in SAS advertisement: the viewer becomes as a camera-carrying tourist in Moscow. PHOTO: GEORG ODDNER

The travel accounts all describe with a measure of disbelief how the Soviet hosts allowed the journalists to search out poor neighborhoods, photograph abject living conditions, and interview people dreaming of leaving the Soviet Union. One of the tourists worked as a doctor in Stockholm and politely requested to visit a Moscow hospital. To the group's amazement, a visit to a mediocre Moscow hospital – not an elite facility – was quickly improvised. While the Swedish-speaking Intourist guide stayed impeccably on message despite frequent attempts by the visitors to tease out an honest opinion, some of her compatriots gladly expressed their critical views of communist society. All things considered, the Swedes were impressed by the liberty the Soviet hosts granted them in their attempts to make sense of the large country.

THE SWEDISH REPORTERS saw enough to draw their own sober conclusions about life in the Soviet Union. The collective farm – an award-winning model collective often shown to foreigners – proved almost inaccessible due to the sorry state of its dirt road after a heavy rainfall. Measured by Swedish standards, Olsson found the collective “dirty, primitive and backward” with the peasants dressed like it was 1917 and a recently built home looking like a relic from the seventeenth century.¹⁰ Österberg agreed, finding that its workers appear “poor and grey and burdened by work and look like our nineteenth-century farmworkers”.¹¹ Höök compared the statistics provided by the farm’s leader with

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data on the Swedish agricultural sector and concluded that a comparable Swedish farm would support twice the number of cattle, produce 40 per cent more milk per cow, and only require a tenth of the Soviet collective’s work force.¹² The journalist was equally critical of the proclaimed Soviet gender equality. As she noted about a group of women construction workers, “the

female equality is an equality in terms of heavy physical work”.¹³

One of the Swedes was a self-declared communist, and the journalists paid close attention to his opinions of the host country. To their satisfaction, he was a far cry from the gullible party member susceptible to Soviet hospitality techniques. On the contrary, he was furious at the poor housing conditions. Summing up the group’s impression, Olsson concluded that “it is the Kremlin and the Red Square that makes Moscow, the rest of the city is slum dressed up as a Potemkin village”.¹⁴ Though the journalists easily saw through any Soviet attempts to shape their opinions they remained conscious of the complexity of Soviet society. When asked upon his return if the people lived in poverty, Olsson replied “it seemed as if the Russians live a great deal better than the Americans claim and a great deal worse than they claim themselves.”¹⁵ And as Österberg, noted, “the happiness coefficient is relative”. Even in the backward rural community life was “as summer-bright, work-driven and inscrutable as anywhere else in the world, where people try to shape their destiny as tolerably as possible within the given framework”.¹⁶ Amidst



A Swedish tourist photographs Soviet visitors of the agricultural exhibition in Moscow.

PHOTO: GEORG ODDNER



Central Asian tourists pose at the statue in Moscow of Yuri Dolgoruky, the city's mythical founder. The monument was completed in 1954.

PHOTO: GEORG ODDNER

intense superpower rivalry and rampant stereotypes fueled by widespread ignorance, the Swedish journalists sought to present a balanced view of the “other side”.

Soviet street photography and the Oddner archive

While the Swedish journalists made their observations, talked to locals, and discussed with the Intourist guide, Georg Oddner often remained to one side, eavesdropping on the conversations while documenting every step with his camera. The result of his efforts is preserved in the Georg Oddner archive held by Malmö Museum. The photo collection contains 670,000 negatives, 2000 of which stem from the visit to the Soviet Union in 1955. The online archive provides access to these photographs as digitized contact prints (i.e., positive prints in the same size as the original negative) that Oddner used to review and identify photographs for further processing. On top of the 2,000 unique contact prints, the archive contains another 700 contact prints consisting of variously developed versions of the same negatives used for finding the ideal light and framing. Many are cropped with a marker and some are singled out for sale or subsequent exhibitions.¹⁷ A ledger provides additional technical data and lists later use in publications and exhibitions. The collection is evidence of Oddner's outstanding talents. The lens and formats used by Oddner (60x60 and 24x36) produced medium range shots that captured sudden impressions of public life in the Soviet Union. Although most shots contain people caught unaware, often on the move, only a tiny fraction of the images are blurred, unbalanced, or poorly framed. The contact prints have been preserved in chronological order and thus document the

extensive trip from the arrival in Moscow to the departure from Leningrad airport.

ODDNER'S WORK IS profoundly inspired by his hero at the time, the French photographer and pioneer of street photography, Henri Cartier-Bresson. Although Oddner earned a living as a fashion photographer at the time of the journey, his main interest was “actual, living life, real life”.¹⁸ In the Soviet Union he dressed anonymously and sought to become one with the scenery, while the other Swedish tourists clearly stood out and attracted attention. Oddner's photographs from the Soviet tour thus belong to the tradition of the Magnum founders Robert Capa and Cartier-Bresson, both of whom had actually visited the Soviet Union after the Second World War. Capa famously journeyed the Soviet Union with John Steinbeck in the autumn of 1947, seeking to document the “private life of the Russian people” while avoiding “politics and the larger issues”,¹⁹ Cartier-Bresson had visited the Soviet Union for ten weeks in 1954 aiming to “get a direct image of the people going about their daily life” and to show “human beings in the streets, in the shops, at work and at play, anywhere I could approach them without disturbing reality”.²⁰ Capa's photojournalism accompanied Steinbeck's travel writing for the *Herald Tribune* and was soon published in the hotly debated *A Russian Journal* (1948). Cartier-Bresson's photos featured in *Life* in January 1955 and also attracted great interest. Thus even if Oddner's company was officially the first postwar contingent of western tourists in the Soviet Union, he was by no means the first postwar western photographer to traverse the country. However, unlike Capa, whom the Soviet authorities considered “friendly disposed”, Oddner harbored little



A Central Asian visitor to Moscow's Tretyakov gallery looks curiously at the camera of a Swedish tourist.

PHOTO: GEORG ODDNER



The depiction of tourists posing for the camera has a long history. "The Season at Niagara Falls," *Harper's Weekly* (August 18, 1877).



Georg Oddner in his studio.

PHOTO: ÅKE HEDSTRÖM/MALMÖ MUSEUM

sympathy for the host country.²¹ His Russian mother had fled from the revolution and the Swedish-born Oddner later reminisced how as a child he expressly disliked everything Russian.²² As a sign of the change from 1947 to 1955, Capa was nevertheless monitored closely and had photos confiscated before he left the country while Oddner encountered few restrictions and was permitted to leave with his work uncensored.²³

Oddner's previously published photographs from the Soviet tour share a familiarity with those of Capa and Cartier-Bresson.²⁴ The street life documented by the three photographers is dominated by women due to the country's immense loss of men during the Second World War. Women mend the roads, reap the wheat, chat on street corners, and populate a shopping arcade. Capa and Cartier-Bresson both shot women dancing with other women. Traces of war are most present in the works of Oddner and Capa. The former captured a one-legged amputee while the latter filmed the wretched living conditions among the ruins of Stalingrad. Cartier-Bresson's pictures in *Life*, meanwhile, largely avoided imagery that could displease the Soviets.

AMONG ODDNER'S previously unpublished works, however, are a number of tableaux unlike anything Capa and Cartier-Bresson came across. Because Oddner traveled in a group he had the opportunity to document the encounters between the tourists, the Soviet authorities, and the locals at a time when westerners were a rare sight. The Oddner archive thus contains scores of scenes where guides point and explain, the tourists gaze, listen, and take their own photographs, and baffled locals gaze at the foreigners as they stand out with their western clothes and camera equipment. There is a long tradition of depicting tourists as vulgar pleasure seekers and mindless herds consuming "sights" designated as such by a commercial tourist industry. This strand of thinking about tourists has also been expressed visually dating back to 19th century paintings and satirical cartoons and continued in recent times in the photography of Martin Parr.²⁵ Oddner's depiction of the tourists, however, contains no such satirizing. Instead, he captures the concentration of the phrasebook-carrying Swedes as they listen respectfully to their guide and the contacts established across linguistic gulfs when locals get to try the tourists' cameras. Oddner also has a keen eye for the agency of the tourists at work in search for the perfect views. These photographs, some of which accompany this essay, may not represent Oddner at his artistic best in terms of framing, composition, motif, and sharpness. However, they show an easily forgotten side of the Soviet Union of 1955: a country that was opening up and making itself available for modern tourist practices such as the mass production of images by tourists with cameras. They thus represent a kind of source that tourism historians often struggle to locate. While there is an abundance of written sources detailing how and why to travel, it is much harder to find visual evidence of actual tourist practices in the past. Hence the Oddner archive is not only of relevance to historians interested in the Soviet Union of the 1950s; it should also appeal to scholars focusing on the visual history of tourism.

In the autumn of 1955, the Swedish Foreign Ministry enquired

Reso about its experiences sending the first tourists to the Soviet Union. Reso reported that they were satisfied. According to the memo forwarded to Petri at the Moscow embassy, “the participants had seemed happy and the collaboration between Reso and Intourist had been frictionless.”²⁶ How the Soviets evaluated the tour and the subsequent press coverage we do not know, but Reso and many other western travel agencies increased their number of tours to the Soviet Union over the following years.²⁷ For the 32-year-old Oddner, the Soviet journey provided a career-defining boost. In November 1955 Cartier-Bresson published a book with photos from his 1954 visit. A Swedish reviewer measured the work against Capa’s and Oddner’s photos from the Soviet Union and found Oddner’s the most interesting. “Which publisher will take care of Oddner?” he asked.²⁸ A volume dedicated solely to the 1955 trip never appeared; with the open online archive, however, now everybody has an opportunity to delve into his oeuvre. ❌

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Note: All photos by Georg Oddner are published with the courtesy of Malmö Museum.

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