

## *Moscow to the End of the Line* Review

**Alexis Verduzco**

The book *Moscow to the End of the Line* is a novel written by the famous author, and even more renown drunk, Venedikt Erofeev. This book was initially published in 1970 through samizdat, which was the underground publication network that was prevalent throughout the Eastern Bloc countries of the Soviet Union during the Cold War era, until it was eventually smuggled out of Russia to Israel and published there in 1973. It was published later again in Paris and eventually got an official release in Russia in 1989 after being on the banned book list for almost two decades due to its portrayal of the Soviet man and life in the Soviet Union. This essay argues that the themes in this book of the dangers of alcoholism, disillusionment with society, and the parody of the “Hero’s Journey” which are portrayed by the main character Venichka, are the antithesis to the views of the Soviet Union at the time. It was also these views that prevented publication in Russia, as the government at the time decreed that this work did not align with the requirements of socialist realism that was meant to portray the country at the time, and it was not until after the Brezhnev era that it would receive proper recognition at home.

*Moscow to the End of the Line* is a story told from the perspective of Venichka, an alcoholic intellectual who can’t seem to do anything right even though he possesses the intelligence to do so. After being fired from his job as foreman of a cable-laying crew for drawing charts that showed the amount of alcohol he and his colleagues were consuming before and during work hours, his objective becomes to ride the train from Moscow to a picturesque town named Petushki to visit the “woman of his dreams and his child.”<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of the story, Venichka wakes up in a

---

<sup>1</sup> Venedikt Erofeev, *Moscow to the End of the Line* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1994); Gregory Freeze, *Russia A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 38-40.

stairwell after a night of heavy drinking, after which he quickly takes a mental inventory of the beverages consumed the night before. Once he gets his affairs in order, he decides to spend the rest of his money on more alcohol and some food for the long trip to Petushki to see his “loved ones.” After acquiring provisions for the upcoming journey, he drunkenly makes his way onto the train and begins what is either going to be his journey of a lifetime or just another drunken weekend.

On his trip to Petushki, Venichka continues drinking copious amounts of alcohol while engaging in a series of conversations with both real people and some others that are very clearly alcohol fueled figments of his imagination. These conversations span a wide variety of topics like music, authors and their works, alcohol and its production/consumption, love, and even some philosophy here and there. As the trip goes on and various stops are reached, he lapses in and out of sleeping (or unconsciousness, it’s hard to tell sometimes) and has disturbing dreams and alcohol fueled hallucinations. During one of these scenes, after arguing with the devil and a sphinx, he somehow boards a train going back to Moscow right as he was going to reach Petushki.<sup>2</sup> Although he questions whether he was indeed still heading to Petushki, he decides to go against his gut feeling and continues his merry way back “home” to Moscow, hallucinations and all. After arriving and walking through city streets at night, Venichka realizes that he is indeed back in Moscow. He is then confronted by a group of men who then proceed to “attack” him, he attempts to take refuge in a stairwell but is quickly found. As he attempts to flee up some stairs he catches sight of the Kremlin, a structure he claimed throughout the novel to never have seen in all his years living in Moscow.<sup>3</sup> The men catch up to him at this moment and end up “killing” him.

One of the main themes to this novel that I noticed was the “hero’s journey” home, or in this book’s case a parody of the hero’s journey. As mentioned earlier, Venichka set out from

---

<sup>2</sup> Erofeev, 138-142.

<sup>3</sup> Erofeev, 160-61.

Moscow in his attempt to return to the “picturesque” town of Petushki to visit his supposed family. It’s hard to take Venichka’s description of this “idyllic paradise” seriously when the USSR was suffering through the “Years of Stagnation” under the Brezhnev regime at the time of original publication. This story can instead be seen as a parody of Homer’s *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus, the king of Ithaca, set out on his journey home after the Trojan War. While both Venichka and Odysseus experience their share of perils on their respective journeys, with one arguing against imaginary creatures and gods while the other battled mythical creatures and gods, only one manages to make it to his destination, albeit 10 years after starting his journey home. Another addition to this point would be the cyclical nature of Venichka’s journey. Unlike Odysseus, Venichka begins and ends his journey in a stairwell in Moscow, which shows that his entire journey was a fruitless endeavor at the end of the story.<sup>4</sup>

While on his journey home, we can see how our “hero” Venichka lost his way. Normally, the hero of the story is driven by a noble cause to either complete an objective that they set for themselves, or to accomplish something for the “greater good.” For Venichka, although his primary objective of getting home to Petushki is a noble one, he goes about attempting and ultimately failing to complete this by constantly making the wrong choice, in his case nonstop drinking. Venichka is meant to be seen as a sympathetic anti-hero to the reader and as someone they can relate to. You can’t help but to feel bad for a man who just wants to go home and see his family (that may or may not exist) after running into issues at work. There are some out there that can also relate to having a drink or two after a tough day at work (which unfortunately in Venichka’s case is always one drink too many). This depiction of the “typical” Soviet resonated with some people who lived a similar lifestyle to Venichka, as a Moscow local named Zhenya states that

---

<sup>4</sup> Erofeev, 13-14, 163-64.

Erofeev's book "was the best description of Soviet reality he knows" in the documentary made about said book.<sup>5</sup> Venichka was also meant to be seen as the new version of the "superfluous man" archetype. This literary archetype was common in 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian literature like in Alexander Pushkin's famous novel, *Eugene Onegin*. To put it in simple terms, the superfluous man is usually an intellectual or some other well-off man who instead of using their talents to help others and contribute to society, waste said talents seeking self-gratification and comfort. As shown throughout different points in the story, Erofeev's Venichka is quite well-read and can have rather eloquent conversations with various people both on the train and in his mind. And although he seemingly lacked a formal education and was constantly plastered, he referenced several works of literature, history, philosophy, and the arts. One more thing that makes Venichka stand apart from the typical superfluous man was his willingness to share both his knowledge and his drinks with those around him, which stood in stark contrast to the general selfishness and isolationist behavior that those like Eugene Onegin exhibit in their respective novels. Erofeev's new interpretation of the superfluous man would have resonated with Soviet people at the time, who decried the political and economic stagnation of the Brezhnev years.<sup>6</sup>

It should come as no surprise that the Soviet government would censor a book like this, which seemed to mock the Soviet socialist realist views that have been in place since the beginning of the Stalin years. These views were a collection of beliefs that soviet media had to adhere to in which media had to be socialist in content and realist in form. The media had to be pro-Socialist in message and had to depict hidden enemies of the state being defeated by the power of socialism. The media also had to depict conditions in their ideal state rather than their true state. Based on the contents of the book, we can see how Venichka was not a new "Soviet Man," but a broken man

---

<sup>5</sup> Pawel Pawlikowski, "From Moscow to Pietushki" BBC, 1990, 42:22.

<sup>6</sup> Gregory Freeze, *Russia A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 446-447.

who was a victim of a broken system. He laments the brokenness of the Soviet Union through his drunken rantings, as well as condemns Soviet leaders going back to Lenin. He and other train passengers lament the broken promises of socialism as well as the futility of daily life while they drank their sorrows away. Like I mentioned before, Venichka's views of the Soviet Union were not unique to him, hence why the party banned the novel. They feared that the drunken rantings of Erofeev would lend an unwanted voice to the discontented citizens of the Soviet Union.

Just because the book was officially banned did not mean that it was silenced forever. Erofeev's novel saw a large success as a samizdat (hand published) work, where it was passed through underground circles, as well as to nations beyond the Soviet Union. Although the book was eventually published outside of the USSR, the samizdat was the only way for citizens in Soviet territories to get a hold of it. In a sense, the book's continued popularity despite its banning justified the government's decision to ban the book in the first place, as too many people were finding common ground with the messaging that was in the book. The book eventually got an official release in the USSR in 1989, but only after the country moved past the Brezhnev era and Gorbachev instituted Glasnost, which allowed more openness to criticism of the Soviet State.

In conclusion, Erofeev's parody of the "Soviet Man" of the Brezhnev era, with his depictions of alcoholism and Soviet disillusionment, were some of the main themes in this book. It was because of this portrayal that the book saw such a turbulent release. This parody was also the reason that the book saw great success outside of the Soviet Union. While Venichka was not the "ideal man" that the Soviet censors wanted as representation, he nonetheless became synonymous with the reality of the USSR at the time. The reality was that much like Venichka, the USSR and its citizens were trapped in a hazy cycle of stagnation and self-destruction. A vicious

cycle that appeared to have no end in sight at the time. It was a shame that it took until 1989 for *Moscow to the End of the Line* to be recognized at home for the great work of art that it was.