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Бениамино Даль Фаббро и СССР/Beniamino Dal Fabbro and the USSR

In 1953, Beniamino Dal Fabbro travelled to the USSR: it was an important moment in his life, as he approached the trip with the enthusiasm of a writer who, even more than curiosity about a world different from the one in which he lived, so rich in historical and political suggestions, was driven by an interest in a country where the works of Pushkin and Tolstoy were born. He would draw indelible impressions from it, as evidenced by his works: a personal diary, a series of photographs and some oil paintings that recall memories of the journey.

A first account of the journey took shape in *Taccuino di Russia* (Russian Notebook), published by Vanni Scheiwiller in 1955. The short text, divided into sections entitled "Mosca", "Leningrad", "In Armenia", "En Route" and concluded with drawings by the author and photographs that enrich the narrative, retraces part of the itinerary, with Dal Fabbro taking every opportunity to describe the landscapes, culture and traditions in relation to Italy.

However, the work that collects and describes the Russian experience is *In Russia coi compagni* (In Russia with the Comrades), a text that remained unpublished and unedited due to continuous time shifts by publishers, until 1967, when De Agostini published it under the title *Un autunno in Russia* (An Autumn in Russia). The book, dedicated "to the memory of Enrico Emanuelli, traveller and travel writer", is the result of the material and stylistic reworking of all the documentation collected during the trip. As Dal Fabbro explains in the "Preface" to the De Agostini edition:

> Once the queue of friends, acquaintances and curious onlookers had been exhausted, I felt that such a vast and insistent demand had to be answered, as they say, a written answer; and I set about copying, ordering and completing the notes in my notebook and diary that had gradually filled the pages of large and small notebooks, suitcase and pocket notebooks, table and lap notebooks, with typewritten, pen and pencil characters during my journey, now fabulous even to myself, across the regions of Russia. (1967)

Proud "to have recorded some creaks in the icy surface, to have sensed that something was moving beneath, something newer, freer and in any case different" (*ibidem*), the author set out to oppose a truth of narration and interpretation, personal and limited as it may be, to that ambiguous genre of reports that presume to provide the reader with the only geopolitical key to today's Russia. He wanted to present Russia in the most concrete and simple way possible, starting from his own experiences and notes, with the aim of conveying impressions that differ from those of a traditional travelogue. "Dal Fabbro was no stranger to Russian affairs, having been a literary critic, and the resulting work was simple but rich and meticulous, an account from early 1950s Russia" (Mondin

2015-2016**).** The book traces, chapter by chapter, the entire journey, addressing geographical, political, literary, and cultural themes, also enriched by a set of photographs that accompany the narrative. As already mentioned, the text was initially submitted to publishers under the title *In Russia with the Comrades*, but "long tossed from left to right and from right to left between the opposing shores of literary art and opinion journalism," it remained unpublished until 1967. Once again, Beniamino's work was appreciated, but the versatility of this author and his interests was not immediately understood or rewarded, and so the work, "by lying dormant for so long," became "a 'document of the era.'" Nevertheless, the work and its story had a positive influence on Dal Fabbro's life and career, and he would return to it in the creation of some later works (*ibidem*).

In 1959, the poetry collection *The Kremlin's Clocks* was published by Neri Pozza. It includes writings on various themes, composed between 1932 and the time of publication. Parallel to the long period of writing, the compositions retrace the most significant experiences and themes for Dal Fabbro. For this reason, divided into three sections, the book includes not only poems on local or sentimental subjects, but also translations of poems by Baudelaire and P.B. Shelley, as well as, finally, compositions concerning the trip to Russia, such as the chapter titled *The Clocks of the Kremlin* and translations of Russian poets. Critics received this work by Dal Fabbro very positively, as it is indeed the most complete and representative of the author's personal and artistic journey.

A few years later, while writing the preface to *An Autumn in Russia*, a memoir of his journey undertaken in 1953, Beniamino Dal Fabbro confessed that he had felt offended by a friend's question asking whether he had done any research on Russia before his departure. He defended the ability and independence of judgment of a writer, whose primary source of information is Russia itself. Later in the preface, even going so far as to issue an accusation against many of his colleagues who had traveled to Russia during those same years—and who, in his view, were guilty of spreading a definitive image of the country, perhaps in some ways even suggested by the Soviets themselves—he sought to distance himself from positions contrary to his own concept of "truth."

> In past centuries, it was mainly architects, singers, and musicians who went to Moscow and St. Petersburg, to adorn the cities of Holy Russia and the court festivities of the Tsars, and they returned full of glory and golden snuffboxes. Now, however, for the past fifteen years or so, writers and journalists have been going to Moscow, Leningrad, and all parts of the vast Soviet territory, returning with wooden nesting dolls, with the trichromatic reproductions of paintings exhibited in government museums—but above all, with the heavy duty of reporting to everyone, through their pens, what Soviet Russia is or ought to be, what life there is like, Having found myself crossing the just slightly loosened mesh of the Iron Curtain a few months after Stalin's death, I instead resolved—following a more ancient literary tradition—to oppose a truth of narration and interpretation, as personal and limited as it may be, to that ambiguous type of reporting which claims to provide readers with the only geopolitical key to today's Russia: a definition suited to all uses of politics and tourism, an irrefutable social, economic, artistic, ideological, technological, and cybernetic expertise of the country. Precisely for this reason, my manuscript has remained unpublished until now, in a sort of quarantine that has stripped it of any

pretension of topical reportage and, at the same time, by aging it, has brought it closer to a less transitory and rarer nature—that of a document from an era made distant less by the number of years gone by than by the magnitude of the events that have since unfolded in Russia and around the world.

If the way these writers present their books seems, in some cases—such as that of Dal Fabbro—to be a form of *captatio benevolentiae* toward the reader, warning them against being ensnared by partial, and thus ideological, views and interpretations of the Soviet world, the pens and sensibilities of many other travelers sought instead to capture and convey what appeared before their eyes in the Soviet universe, drawing on numerous prior travel experiences.The recurring practice of self-attesting to the truthfulness of one's account, often placed at the beginning of many writings, invites reflection on the attempt made by many authors to reassure their readers that they will be offered a new vision of the Soviet world—one not tainted by personal or partisan ideologies—thus addressing an audience of readers not limited to the political left.

A peculiar interest to Dal Fabbro's travel to USSR, and the publication of his writings on it, have the editorial details of the contacts and agreements for the publication of his manuscripts, in particular with Einaudi. The main interlocutor was Italo Calvino, chief editor at the Einaudi publishing house in those years. As it emerges from the correspondence between the two writers and mainly conserved at the Public Library in Belluno, Dal Fabbro had many problems to submit his writings on Russia to be published by Einaudi. As witnessed in those letters, Calvino and Einaudi were interested in publishing the rest of the manuscript of *Taccuino di Russia*, already apperead unaccomplished in 1955 by Scheiwiller editions in Milan. Another important Italian writer, Elio Vittorini, who worked for Einaudi and well knew Calvino, suggested to him Dal Fabbro's book on USSR (ms 36). However, already at the beginning of 1956 (letter of the 26th March) Calvino showed his doubts about the actual relevance of Dal Fabbro's witness on Russia (ms 37). It must not be forgotten in fact that, meanwhile, other writers, journalists and delegations had left or were ready to leave for USSR, and their writings would probably better inform Italian readers on the recent events about Khrushchev's revelations at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party. So, the same Calvino announced the "impossibility to publish the book on the USSR (for market strategies), by the publisher Einaudi" (ms 38). Neverthless, a few months later (letter of the 9th September 1956) always Calvino wrote to Dal Fabbro about a postponement of the publication of his book (ms 39). In another letter (9th October 1956) the two writers spoke about annotations on the drafts of the book on the USSR "Russia in controluce" (ms 40). Finally, there is "the announcement of the publication of the book on the USSR, written by Dal Fabbro, entitled 'Russia controluce'" (letter 12th December 1956, ms 41). But, as we know, the epilogue of this story will be

another. Other letters to other addresses (Malipiero, Marzot, Sereni), possibly refer to further episodes concerning the vicissitudes of the publication of Dal Fabbro's writings on his USSR travel. **This paper constitutes a few notes on the subject that will be deeply treated on an accomplished article to be published.**