

CHAPTER XXIV

On the evening of the first of September, after his interview with Kutúzov, Count Rostopchín had returned to Moscow mortified and offended because he had not been invited to attend the council of war, and because Kutúzov had paid no attention to his offer to take part in the defense of the city; amazed also at the novel outlook revealed to him at the camp, which treated the tranquillity of the capital and its patriotic fervor as not merely secondary but quite irrelevant and unimportant matters. Distressed, offended, and surprised by all this, Rostopchín had returned to Moscow. After supper he lay down on a sofa without undressing, and was awakened soon after midnight by a courier bringing him a letter from Kutúzov. This letter requested the count to send police officers to guide the troops through the town, as the army was retreating to the Ryazán road beyond Moscow. This was not news to Rostopchín. He had known that Moscow would be abandoned not merely since his interview the previous day with Kutúzov on the Poklónny Hill but ever since the battle of Borodinó, for all the generals who came to Moscow after that battle had said unanimously that it was impossible to fight another battle, and since then the government property had been removed every night, and half the inhabitants had left the city with Rostopchín's own permission. Yet all the same this information astonished and irritated the count, coming as it did in the form of a simple note with an order from Kutúzov, and received at night, breaking in on his beauty sleep.

When later on in his memoirs Count Rostopchín explained his actions at this time, he repeatedly says that he was then actuated by two important considerations: to maintain tranquillity in Moscow and expedite the departure of the inhabitants. If one accepts this twofold aim all Rostopchín's actions appear irreproachable. "Why were the holy relics, the arms, ammunition, gunpowder, and stores of corn not removed? Why were thousands of inhabitants deceived into believing that Moscow would not be given up—and thereby ruined?" "To preserve the tranquillity of the city," explains Count Rostopchín. "Why were bundles of useless papers from the government offices, and Leppich's balloon and other articles removed?" "To leave the town empty," explains Count Rostopchín. One need only admit that public tranquillity is in danger and any action finds a justification.

All the horrors of the reign of terror were based only on solicitude for public tranquillity.

On what, then, was Count Rostopchín's fear for the tranquillity of Moscow based in 1812? What reason was there for assuming any probability of an uprising in the city? The inhabitants were leaving it and the retreating troops were filling it. Why should that cause the masses to riot?

Neither in Moscow nor anywhere in Russia did anything resembling an insurrection ever occur when the enemy entered a town. More than ten thousand people were still in Moscow on the first and second of September, and except for a mob in the governor's courtyard, assembled

there at his bidding, nothing happened. It is obvious that there would have been even less reason to expect a disturbance among the people if after the battle of Borodínó, when the surrender of Moscow became certain or at least probable, Rostopchín instead of exciting the people by distributing arms and broadsheets had taken steps to remove all the holy relics, the gunpowder, munitions, and money, and had told the population plainly that the town would be abandoned.

Rostopchín, though he had patriotic sentiments, was a sanguine and impulsive man who had always moved in the highest administrative circles and had no understanding at all of the people he supposed himself to be guiding. Ever since the enemy's entry into Smolénsk he had in imagination been playing the role of director of the popular feeling of "the heart of Russia." Not only did it seem to him (as to all administrators) that he controlled the external actions of Moscow's inhabitants, but he also thought he controlled their mental attitude by means of his broadsheets and posters, written in a coarse tone which the people despise in their own class and do not understand from those in authority. Rostopchín was so pleased with the fine role of leader of popular feeling, and had grown so used to it, that the necessity of relinquishing that role and abandoning Moscow without any heroic display took him unawares and he suddenly felt the ground slip away from under his feet, so that he positively did not know what to do. Though he knew it was coming, he did not till the last moment wholeheartedly believe that Moscow would be abandoned, and did not prepare for it. The inhabitants left against his wishes. If the government offices were removed, this was only done on the demand of officials to whom the count yielded reluctantly. He was absorbed in the role he had created for himself. As is often the case with those gifted with an ardent imagination, though he had long known that Moscow would be abandoned he knew it only with his intellect, he did not believe it in his heart and did not adapt himself mentally to this new position of affairs.

All his painstaking and energetic activity (in how far it was useful and had any effect on the people is another question) had been simply directed toward arousing in the masses his own feeling of patriotic hatred of the French.

But when events assumed their true historical character, when expressing hatred for the French in words proved insufficient, when it was not even possible to express that hatred by fighting a battle, when self-confidence was of no avail in relation to the one question before Moscow, when the whole population streamed out of Moscow as one man, abandoning their belongings and proving by that negative action all the depth of their national feeling, then the role chosen by Rostopchín suddenly appeared senseless. He unexpectedly felt himself ridiculous, weak, and alone, with no ground to stand on.

When, awakened from his sleep, he received that cold, peremptory note from Kutúzov, he felt the more irritated the more he felt himself to blame. All that he had been specially put in charge of, the state property which he should have removed, was still in Moscow and it was no longer possible to take the whole of it away.

“Who is to blame for it? Who has let things come to such a pass?” he ruminated. “Not I, of course. I had everything ready. I had Moscow firmly in hand. And this is what they have let it come to! Villains! Traitors!” he thought, without clearly defining who the villains and traitors were, but feeling it necessary to hate those traitors whoever they might be who were to blame for the false and ridiculous position in which he found himself.

All that night Count Rostopchín issued orders, for which people came to him from all parts of Moscow. Those about him had never seen the count so morose and irritable.

“Your excellency, the Director of the Registrar’s Department has sent for instructions.... From the Consistory, from the Senate, from the University, from the Foundling Hospital, the Suffragan has sent... asking for information.... What are your orders about the Fire Brigade? From the governor of the prison... from the superintendent of the lunatic asylum...” All night long such announcements were continually being received by the count.

To all these inquiries he gave brief and angry replies indicating that orders from him were not now needed, that the whole affair, carefully prepared by him, had now been ruined by somebody, and that that somebody would have to bear the whole responsibility for all that might happen.

“Oh, tell that blockhead,” he said in reply to the question from the Registrar’s Department, “that he should remain to guard his documents. Now why are you asking silly questions about the Fire Brigade? They have horses, let them be off to Vladímir, and not leave them to the French.”

“Your excellency, the superintendent of the lunatic asylum has come: what are your commands?”

“My commands? Let them go away, that’s all.... And let the lunatics out into the town. When lunatics command our armies God evidently means these other madmen to be free.”

In reply to an inquiry about the convicts in the prison, Count Rostopchín shouted angrily at the governor:

“Do you expect me to give you two battalions—which we have not got—for a convoy? Release them, that’s all about it!”

“Your excellency, there are some political prisoners, Meshkóv, Vereshchágin...”

“Vereshchágin! Hasn’t he been hanged yet?” shouted Rostopchín. “Bring him to me!”