A Nightmarish Russia

Anti-communist obsession was everywhere and those running the XXe Siecle did not think it a bad thing to inform their young readers of the evils of Bolshevism.

Hergé himself did not have the time either to visit the country to which he was sending his newly-created character, or to analyse all that had been written about it. All the local colour which appears in Tintin in the land of the Soviets is derived from a sole source: the book Moscou sans voiles (Moscow Unveiled) by Joseph Douillet, a former Belgian consul in Rostov-on-Don, which appeared in 1928.

Reading Douillet’s book today is quite amusing because of the line he takes and the sometimes curious causes of his indignation. For example: ‘In a village where once there were ten schools, there now exists under the Soviet regime only one high school: mixed, for boys and girls; thus the communists, with premeditated immorality, are bringing together the two sexes in schools.’

Other passages are even more surprising, since they are the origin of whole scenes of Tintin in the land of the Soviets, which at times seems to be nothing else but a cartoon strip adaptation of particular parts of Moscou sans voiles. For example, the following section is picked up almost word for word in the Tintin book:

‘Comrade Oubiykone (retiring chairman of the executive committee) made a speech. This is how he harangued the crowd:

“There are three lists: one is that of the communist party. Those who oppose this list raise their hand!”

At the same time Oubiykone and his four comrades produced their revolvers and levelled them threateningly at the crowd of peasants. Oubiykone continued:

“Who then declares himself against this list? Nobody? I then declare the communist list to have been passed unanimously. It is therefore unnecessary to vote for the other two lists.”’

The Birth of an Art

Apart from its political aspect, what is interesting today about this book is that with it we see the invention of the cartoon strip as Hergé saw it. Influenced by American comics, the author has moved on from the illustrative concept seen with Totor to that of a new language where text and picture complement each other without repeating themselves.

The technique of dialogue integrated with drawing was so unusual at the time that when Tintin in the land of the Soviets was featured in the French weekly Coeurs vaillants, the editors, believing that readers would not be able to understand the story, added explanatory text underneath the pictures. Hergé had to stop them.

The book is also compelling on account of the page-by-page progress it reveals of Hergé’s talent. Compare the first plate with its rudimentary quality and the sometimes remarkable later sequences. At the start of the book Tintin is little more than an awkward and rather ridiculous boy scout. By the end of his adventure with the Bolshevics, he resembles pretty much the character we know so well. In the course of 138 plates, Hergé had completed his apprenticeship.

The source for Tintin in the land of the Soviets.
The Book’s History

Initially published in a print run of 5,000 by Editions du Petit Vingtième, Tintin in the land of the Soviets was the only early Tintin book not to have been republished subsequently by Editions Casterman.

As Hergé’s reputation continued to grow, this rare book soon became something of a myth in the world of the strip cartoon. Only a few fanatical collectors could hope to lay their hands on a first edition at a fantastic price. Then in 1969, to mark Tintin’s 40th birthday, a privileged few were recipients of the 500 numbered copies of a sumptuously produced limited edition brought out by the Hergé Studios.

Demand was such that several unscrupulous publishers saw the chance of cashing in. Soon a number of mediocre-quality pirated editions began surfacing at very high prices. Hergé tried at first to take action.

But as the flow of pirated editions continued, he finally decided to cut the ground from under their feet by authorising the book’s republication. So in 1973 it was published as part of the Hergé Archives anthology together with Tintin in the Congo and Tintin in America.

That, one might have thought, would have been the end of the affair. But collectors do not give up easily. After a quiet period, new pirated editions reappeared on the market, imitating as closely as possible the original edition and often sold as such to gullible buyers.

There remained only one thing to do: to publish a true facsimile edition of the original Tintin in the land of the Soviets. The success of this venture was extraordinary, with almost 100,000 copies more than expected sold in the last three months of 1981.

It was this which convinced Hergé and Editions Casterman to bring out in the same facsimile edition form all the other Tintin books that had originally been published in black and white — to the delight of all enthusiasts...