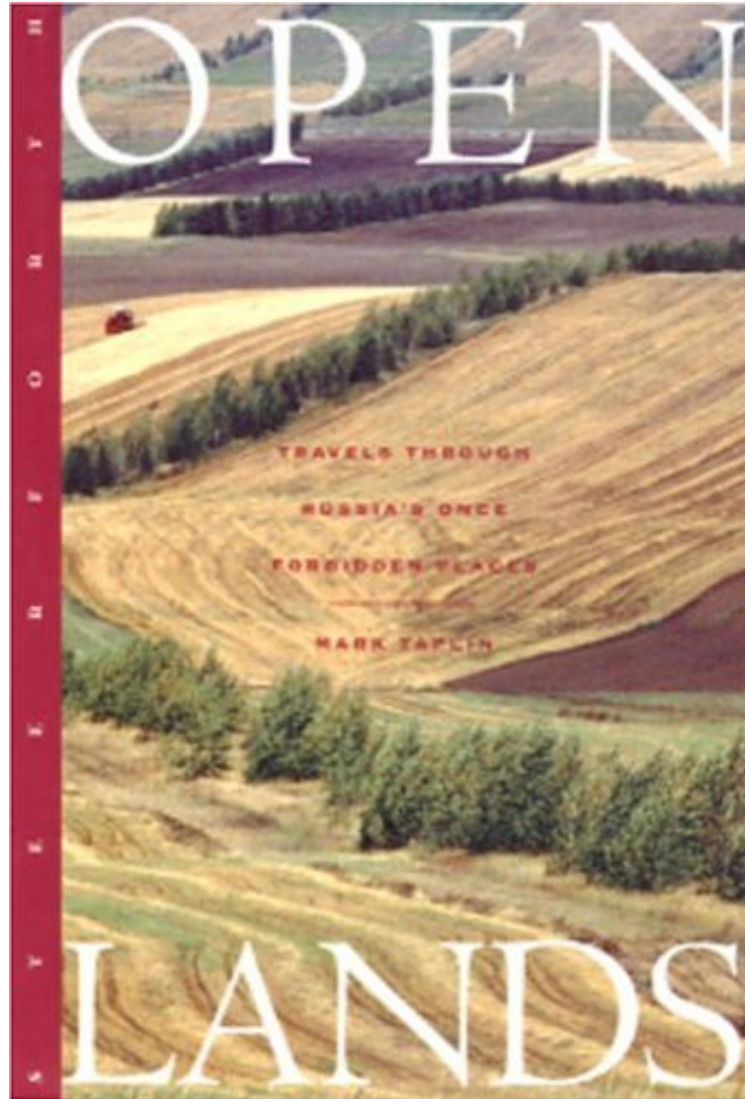


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Open Lands : Travels Through Russia's Once Forbidden Places

Mark Taplin

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Mark Taplin : Open Lands : Travels Through Russia's Once Forbidden Places before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Open Lands : Travels Through Russia's Once Forbidden Places:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Well-done indeed. By A Customer As an American who has lived in Russia at various times over 4 decades, over 40 years, both under Communism and in the decade since the fall of the Communist regime, I can say "Open Lands" really resonates. The author has done an excellent job of conveying the feel of the place - the look, climate, atmosphere. Beyond that, he's done a very good job indeed weaving the larger

political and historical context into the work, so that places are set in time and space. Beautifully written, sensitive, accurate, telling account with great eye for detail. Fascinating, and worth buying. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars By michael mcguiregood book8 of 11 people found the following review helpful. Open Lands, Closed Mind? By R. V. Prooyen This is basically a time-warp report which punishes Russia about past tragedies, human suffering, and sly politics; written with a sort of morose satisfaction. It's not about the Russian spirit successfully striving to leapfrog from the 19th century Russian culture into the 21st century global culture. Readers will either rub their hands with glee at the sullen, false representation of Russia's lost century as still extant, or they will admire the spirit, creativity and willpower of a people strong enough to bounce from a 3rd world country to a fledgling 1st world country...in just ten years! For the savvy reader, the book does provide a remarkable opportunity to read between the lines and compare new news with old history. The trap for the unwary reader is to take the author's second-hand descriptions of old Russian tragedies and past injustices as a blanket picture of present day. He lovingly describes the infrastructure conditions left over from an oppressive era; cracked buildings, ex gulag-prisoners' memories, hidden mass graves, cold trains, sheep's-head dinners, 1940-truck repairs, out-dated clothing, smuggling, mud, vodka, no bitumen, and so on. All seems hopeless and the read can be a bit of a downer unless one slaps himself awake to realize that Russia is not starting from the bottom. It's not an apathetic, fly-blown, poverty stricken bog that can't feed itself. In reality, there is no-one starving, the trains are clean and do run on time. They have industry, science, medicine, atomic energy, universities, space travel, literature, art, agriculture, creative spirit, smiles and hope. Otto von Bismark, the Prussian chancellor, once commented, "The Russians may take a long time to saddle their horses, but when they ride, they ride!" I give the book three stars for reporting, with seeming relish, only the unsavory. There's an opportunity for the author to redeem his objectivity and do the trip again in present time for Volume Two. It would make a very interesting read. Except next time, interview the people who are remaking the country; shave, bathe and leave the back-pack at home.

"An extraordinary and beautifully written chronicle that combines the best of different genres: travel writing, journalism, and history . . . A modern classic tale of a foreigner's travels through Russia."--Kirkus Reviews VAST FORBIDDEN AREAS, once marked in red on official maps of the Soviet Union, were suddenly thrown open for travel in 1992 when the United States and Russia signed the "Open Lands" agreement which allowed free travel throughout both countries. For nearly 75 years whole cities and regions, roads, rail lines, and rivers, had been colored crimson on the maps, hidden from the prying eyes of foreigners by the secretive Soviet government. Taplin interpreted the Open Lands agreement as an invitation to hit the road, visiting seven cities and regions – from the Arctic to the Caucasus, from Gorky in the west to Kamchatka in the far east – which had been barred to foreigners for decades. Taplin's report of what he found, Open Lands, is an exhilarating, rugged journey into the world of ordinary Russians. "While Open Lands does not pretend to be a scholarly work," wrote the Moscow Times, "there is enough research here to satisfy the historian. It is a thoroughly enjoyable read . . . a heartfelt evocation of lands and peoples struggling to come to grips with their past and their future."

.com Mark Taplin went to Russia in 1984, a junior-level diplomat sent deep into Cold War land. He tells of the map he studied, colored green for the few cities where foreigners were allowed, and omnipresent red for "Stay Away." In 1992 Taplin returned. Russia and the U.S. had signed an "Open Lands" agreement allowing free travel, and Taplin wanted to explore the lands that taunted and haunted him from the map eight years before. The result is a book you can't put down, an informed look at a complex country. Russia requires more than a casual eye and pen to sort through the contradictions, and Taplin excels in both. From Kirkus s An extraordinary and beautifully written chronicle that combines the best of different genres: travel writing, journalism, and history. His first book reveals Taplin, a former public-information officer in the American Embassy in Moscow, to be a keen observer of Russian life and a gifted writer. Fortuitously, he was living in Moscow in 1992 when Russia and the US signed the "Open Lands" agreement permitting free travel throughout both countries. Taplin immediately took action. "Instinctively," he writes, "I knew I had to go beyond Moscow and St. Petersburg, sly old deceivers of travelers past. Was there a truer expression of Russia's past and its future in those forbidden places of the Soviet era?" He searches for answers in seven locales: Velikiy Ustyug, Vorkuta, Arkhangelsk Solovki, Kabardino-Balkaria, Tuva, Kamchatka, and Vladivostok. His journeys are full of surprises, revealing a curious mixture of the old and the new, the Soviet-driven and the local. Contrary to general opinion, Vladivostok is not alien or exotic; "it was a veritable bastion of Russianness." It is also, Taplin finds, the very embodiment of the new Russia, its future "framed, at least for now, by commerce, crime and chaos." In Vorkuta, an inhospitable, snow-covered land that is home to isolated villages and the ruins of innumerable Gulag camps, Taplin discovers ghosts of Russia's past. With his malleable prose, he is able to convey the sentiments, personalities, and worlds of both the head organizer of monuments honoring the Gulag's victims and of a woman who defends and honors those who headed the forced-labor brigades that built the region's roads and railroads. Above all, it is Taplin's exquisite literary sensibility that animates this narrative. A description of Vladivostok's airport, applicable universally to former Soviet or East European transport vehicles illustrates his precision and wit: "The airport terminal

. . . was another of Russia's countless dysfunctional edifices, a glass-fronted incubator of grime and body odor." A modern classic tale of a foreigner's travels through Russia. -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. Mark Taplin's *Open Lands* is a first effort with sufficient intelligence and wit to promise good things, but it displays weaknesses common to the genre: It has some adventure, some social history, some contemporary reportage and some fine writing but not enough of any one of them. Taplin set himself a task that perhaps no one could really do justice to.... Throughout *Open Lands* there are indications that, equipped with better material, Taplin could produce a fine book. Some of his writerly touches are compact and lovely, and he has a playful subversive wit that breaks out at surprising moments.... -- Los Angeles Times Sunday Book , Brian Hall