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Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia's City of Steel

by Kavita Bhavsar

(History 2225)

B*ehind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia's City of Steel*, written by John Scott, provides a vivid description of the life of Russian people during the massive expansion of steel industry in 20's and 30's in Russia. John Scott, left the University of Wisconsin in 1931 after two years of study. Appalled by the depression in the United States and attracted by what he had heard concerning the efforts to create a "new society" in the Soviet Union, he obtained training as a welder in a General Electric plant then went to the Soviet Union to join the great crusade. He was assigned to the construction of new "Soviet Pittsburg," Magnitogorsk, on the eastern slopes of the Ural Mountains, the twenty-year-old was first an electric welder. His role in construction had ended as a foreman and chemist in a coke and chemicals by-products plant. He lived in barracks, suffered from arctic wintry cold and the stifling summer heat, studied evenings, like other Russians at that time, married a Russian girl- in short, lived for five years as a Russian among Russians.

John Scott, decided to go to Russia to work study, and lend a hand in the construction of a society and was liberally rewarded for his work, and accepted by his fellow workers in Magnitogorsk. The building of the blast furnace was the main purpose of the workers in the cold weather. The implementation of the GPU was to inform and take possession of the property of people and give it to the new collective farm. Sometimes they ship the entire family out. If anyone revolted against them, they were killed by the GPU officials.

It took all different types of hardships to make Magnitogorsk- a steel city because of its geographic location. As it was located far away from the other center of industries, there was great difficulty in transporting tools essential to work, and food for the recruits. Due to cold weather and lack of coal for heat, workers were suffering in the cold weather. The workers were malnourished and it was clear that all the factors were disturbing the progress of building furnace and blast. There was continuous demand by directors of the plant to speed up and get things done. Surrounded by the hostile capitalist nations, the workers were forced to industrialize the vast and great country in the shortest possible time. It spread the message that Magnitogorsk is the single most important heavy industry center in the Soviet Union. Millions of roubles have been invested, thousands of workers have come from far and wide, and the country is waiting for the steel and iron made there.

After the revolution, the Soviet Union was full of untrained, inexperienced and uneducated workers, who began to acquire the means of mass-production through the state, but could not adequately operate or maintain equipment, nor manage or organize labor forces—processes that had already been mastered in western Europe and the United States. The conditions of the young recruits from the villages, who had not learned to make the real steel, got the left over of clothes and shoes, because there was not anything available. The riggers who work high in the plant, generally got a high rank and had more salary, but there was more risk associated with it too. The circumstances were not safe. The safety first organizations were not able to take effective steps in the direction of cutting down the accidents happening in the plant. There were three main causes of them: first, the inexperience of the worker and not have the understanding of danger; second, lack of sufficient lumber to make required scaffoldings, ladders with railing, etc: and third, scarcity of bulbs, which meant that the worker had to work in the dark. Bad organization also persistently created problems. There was dishonesty in the plant election. Therefore, there was no interest in meetings or elections

for the plant. There was only one candidate for election, and he was sent from a higher body, so elections meant nothing.

The living conditions of the people were very bad. The food conditions were a constant subject of discussion in the Red Corner at the barracks before or after dinner. There was long queue to get some food. There was difference in getting even the basic requirement of life like food. The order of rank in society was such that the higher got the most pleasant things and the lower, suffered a lot. The foreign specialist or a high party member of GPU, would get the finest food and clothing and wine from the foreign store; engineers, foremen, would have technicians' cards and could buy from the technicians' store, which sold some food items; but the majority of the people would buy from the workers' store. Bread was the only thing available. Overall, the population was divided into categories to get the minimum requirement of life.

Most of the workers were unmarried, due to the shortage of women in any large construction camp and the reflection of the hard living conditions. After doing heavy physical work at low temperature on a bad diet, little energy was left for making love, particularly if it had to be done out of doors or in overcrowded rooms.

Education and health care were not working efficiently. Most of the teachers were engineers working in the designing office or on the job. They came to do their teaching often exhausted and unprepared. There was deprivation of higher education to disfranchised citizens, but, later, a declaration from Moscow granted equal educational rights. The hospitals were usually crowded, understaffed and the doctors and the nurses usually lacked experience, often far from clean. However, they had first aid stations in all important departments of the plant with some trained nurses and sometimes doctors. Due to this shortage, they had to work 2-3 shifts, which was illegal, but there was no other alternative.

The pace of construction was such that millions of men and women starved, froze, and were brutalized by merciless labor and implausible living conditions. The first serious project for the Magnitogorsk Metallurgical combine was made in 1928. The implementation was made without sufficient labor, without necessary quantities of the most elementary supplies and materials. One of the major problems was shortage of accomplished labor and supplies. Until 1934-35, the Soviet workers were urged by consistent propaganda to learn from foreigners to master the German and American techniques.

Behind the Ural, also describes the societal and economic conditions of the majority of Russians. Through the part of Masha, it can be concluded that the hard living conditions were part of Russian life. The condition encourages Masha and millions of people like her to have better education and profession even out of the scarcity and lack of food and shelter. John Scott and Masha get married and lived busily, simply and happily. Their main motivation was to study and work. This was common among Russians at that time. The inter-relationship between the work, study and food were the main components of the Russian people.

The "Battle of Iron and Steel" shows that inexperience and carelessness took a heavy toll in the blast furnace system. Regardless of that, Magnitogorsk produced more pig iron in 1935 than all mills in Czechoslovakia, Italy, and Poland. The workers were divided into various categories, according to their qualification, and could ask for a higher category at any time, if they could pass the examination and receive it. Working hours were reduced as production rose. In 1935, the main energies of the country were transferred from construction to production. In spite of many examples of rationalization and strengthening of labor at the cost of men's life, many who were not necessary, were taken off, and the productivity of labor increased. As the things were progressing at the Magnitogorsk plant, the living conditions were getting better. Fuel, clothing, and other elementary necessities became available. It was no longer necessary to steal in order to live. The main thing was that the technicians and workers began to appreciate and correctly evaluate human life, and both their own and other people's, and this was extremely important in a country where, totalitarianism, war,

famine and dissent had made life very contemptible.

The Stakhanov movement became very important after Stalin addressed the first Stakhanovite conference and pointed out that improved living conditions and technical training of industrial personnel had created the basis for drastic increases in productivity, which should be realized without delay. As the improvement was going on, pessimistic forces were being created. The norms were raised in the fall of 1936 after a publicity speech by Stalin. All the rolling mills were given hard plans. Despite the bad organization and stupidity of the plant and open hearth, Magnitogorsk was still making progress. Expensive steel was made, both in terms of roubles and human lives, but ten millions tons of steel would make a great many tanks whose military effectiveness bore no relation to the price paid for the steel. Yet, by 1939, the work of certain departments became better than before. This was the case with coke chemical plant and railroads. The five year plan from 1937-42 made a real progress in production.

The increasing complexities of economic, commercial and the political life in the early thirties made it absolutely essential for the government to create a Soviet intelligentsia. The work of the plant went on because of Stalin and his political bureau. Plays demonstrated the necessity for the entire population to cooperate with the authorities in detaining foreign spies. On the other hand, they failed to point out the dangers and tragedy involved in over enthusiastic purging. Due to Stalin's act and the purge's act, they could carry some spies now, but it would take a generation to live down the fear and suspicion being created. Acknowledging Stalin's domination, prompted one to look into the information surrounding the purges in Russia during Stalin's reign and discover the underlying horror.

These foreigners working in the plant, later on, were over taken by the young Soviet workers. This was a background for the reaction which came in such a force in 1936-37, when foreigners were dismissed, demoted, publicly discredited, sent home, and sometimes arrested. The Five Year Plan, in actuality, made such rapid progress because it made use of human life as if it were worthless. Stalin began to purge dissenters by having them convicted on false charges. He started a war against fictitious domestic terror in his country through propaganda. The term *Stalinism* is closely associated with *totalitarianism*: the direct control by a centralized government of the economic, cultural, and informational structure—i.e., propaganda—of a society. The term is also directly associated with military authoritarianism, cruelty, and the worst dictatorships. However, he made earth-shaking changes in Russia, hanging civilization by its feet, and throat, and rendering it helpless in his grasp. Stalin's purges are an important part of history, and understanding what are perceived to be historical atrocities is paramount to having a balanced and clear world-view.

Due to purges, unfortunately, many foreigners left the Soviet Union carrying away the impression that purges ended everything, but this was basically incorrect. At the end of 1938, when the purge ended, hundreds of people were released with terse apologies; most of the workers in Magnitogorsk had an essentially cheerful and optimistic view of things. They were functioning and so were certain of jobs and improvement as far as they cared to see. They enjoyed vacations, maternity vacations, pension plans, social legislation, studying and benefited themselves and society as soon as they graduated, or before. The standard of living was rising. The purge had a devastating effect on millions of Soviet citizens, arrested and exiled, but Stalin considered the investment a good one.

The communist city was getting built. The students of this new society were more enthusiastic than in America. No tuition was paid until 1940. However, the workers who had already learned a trade were not supposed to use the State's money for education, while thousands of peasants came to the industrialized centre every year. The students were just the run of the population of the Soviet Union making up for several centuries of lost time. Each increase in category of worker meant higher wages, which gave them a desire to learn. The heavy differentiation, plus the absence of unemployment and the consequent assurance of being able without difficulty to get a job in any profession learned, supplemented, and stimulated the intellectual curiosity of the people. The various

educational systems failed to give the child this necessary, thorough, knowledge, but tended rather to develop his originality, his independence, his power of critical thinking. Such attributes in the Soviet Union, made potentially dangerous citizens, and were liabilities rather than assets from the standpoint of the “dictator of the proletariat.” There existed two main types of schools, FZD and FZU factory schools. They trained them to be welders, machinists, electricians, etc. At the age of eighteen, the boy or girl was put on an equal basis with adults.

After spending five years in Magnitogorsk, John Scott went on vacation to America. There he observed the difference between the problems of a capitalist country and Russia. The Soviet Union was operating a deficit economy, while the capitalist countries were struggling with a surplus economy. The problems with unemployment, increasing taxes, health care and education were rising in these capitalist countries. The validity of sociological and economic principles upon which it was founded were diminishing. He also observed the widespread misinformation of Russia and the Russian in America. During his absences in Russia, the purges had made astonishing developments. There was no place for foreigners anymore in the plant and around. Most of them went back to native countries, and those who had taken Soviet citizenship were arrested and sent to Siberia. The whole thing seems unreasonable and preposterous. The Stalinist constitution of 1936 had promised a democratic and free society, but the NKVD seemed to have run away with the show, the purge appeared to be consuming what had been created.

The new discoveries and observations in the other field radically modified the Marxist-Leninist social precepts which underlay the theories of the proletarian revolutionary, of the construction of Socialism, as they were understood and applied by Stalin. Stalin’s indomitable and ruthless tenacity was responsible for the construction of Magnitogorsk and the entire Ural and Western Siberial industrial areas.

Speech and propaganda were supplemented by severe labor legislation. By 1942, the Ural industrial became the stronghold of the Soviet resistance. Its mills, mines, and shops, its fields and forests, supplied the Red Army with immense military materials, which were necessary to keep Stalin’s mechanized divisions in the field. The extraordinary task was accomplished by the political shrewdness of Stalin, and by the heavy cost and brutal difficulties. One point made by Stalin was that any production made in Magnitogorsk was safe and out of reach of any enemy bombers because of its location. Soviet industrialization was achieved almost without the aid of foreign capital. It was industrialized by the sweat and blood of the one hundred and sixty million inhabitants of the vast country. At the same time, the population was taught by a painful and expensive process to work efficiently, to obey orders, to mind their own business and to take it on the chin when necessary with minimum complaint. These are the things that took to fight a modern war.

Behind the Urals provides a graphic description of life in the new steel city and the life of workers under the first five year plan. It describes the clear details which include the ugliness and the squalor as well as the endurance and the dedication. The shortage of food, housing, and equipment, the vast differentials in wages and salaries, the existence of comfortable suburbs for specialists, officials, and foreigners while Bashkir shepherds only a month away from the medieval times froze to death in the tents, the almost incredible inefficiency and waste, the role of the GPU and of prison labor, the purges- all these aspects of Magnitogorsk are revealed in this book. At the same time, it also describes the rising tempo, the desperate drive to build, and the ultimate creation of the “socialist city” and the modern steel industry. The book is a primary source as author John Scott did not rely on other sources for his opinion. His role in Russia was like one of the millions of workers. Though, he was able to leave the Soviet Union in times of tribulation along with his family and did not have to suffer, unlike others who were not able to. The book increases the reader’s understanding and view of Russia. It gives a detailed description of the life of Russian people, purges, and the propaganda of Stalin to make the steel city.

Work Cited

Scott, John. *Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia's City of Steel*. Ed. Robert Byrnes. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1973.