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## An American Worker in Russia's City of Steel

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An American Worker in Russia's City of Steel

by Christine Dyslin

(History 2225)

**B***ehind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia's City of Steel* was published at a crucial moment in American history. The year 1942 saw the United States drawn into a conflict already raging on European soil: a war which was trying the souls of American allies in Britain and the Soviet Union. As a theme for this revealing book about his observations in the Soviet city of Magnitogorsk, author John Scott used Winston Churchill's May, 1940 speech to the House of Commons, at the start of British involvement in World War II, in which Churchill said, "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat" (<http://www.winstonchurchill.org>). The choice to quote Churchill (actually, Scott misquotes Churchill) was a deliberate one, drawing an immediate parallel in the minds of Scott's American readers; a parallel between the British people enduring the onslaught of Luftwaffe bombings, and the subject of his book, the Russian people, enduring the onslaught of Stalin's Five-year plans. Scott used a war metaphor, so appropriate in 1942, to illustrate the many battles which the Russian people faced in the 1930's as Josef Stalin enacted a rapid industrialization program such as the world had never seen; the willingness of the Russian people to fight on this "iron and steel front" impressed Scott immensely (5), much as the rest of the world was impressed at the time with the spirit of the British people as they defiantly went about their business while their country was bombed. John Scott noted, much to his frustration, how little the Western world knew about the new Soviet state. The French and Americans he had met in his travels expressed, in fact, many ill-informed opinions about the Soviet Union of the 1930's (227). With this book, John Scott was intentionally making comparisons between Stalinist Russia and the West, with the purpose of helping an American audience begin to understand this mysterious country. As the title suggests, Scott attempted, in this work, to pull back the curtain and allow the West to see behind the barriers and into the "blood, sweat and tears" being shed in the battle for the soul of the Russian people (5).

Of the several "fronts" which John Scott described as indicative of the internal war raging within Stalinist Russia, perhaps the one which Scott found most positive for the future of the Soviet Union was the battle of rapid industrialization embodied in Stalin's five-year plans. It is easy to see why Scott felt optimistic regarding the Soviet industrial economy when he left the country in 1938. He had come into Magnitogorsk in 1931 to work alongside a multitude of untrained and inexperienced people, thrown together to work toward the impossible goal of creating an industrial city in the middle of the barren steppes of Russia. His early experiences in working to build blast furnaces were fraught with waste, inefficiency and hardship: simple problems such as a shortage of light bulbs or the stealing of lumber for firewood became insurmountable, causing work stoppages, accidents, and always, suffering (31). As the years passed, however, Scott participated in the completion of the furnaces and witnessed a marked improvement in the standard of living in Magnitogorsk as industrialization found its footing. When he left the country on vacation to America in 1937, he was able to draw comparisons between the economies of the West and that of industrial Russia. He noted the absence of unemployment in the Soviet Union as he watched two French men out of work, asking for charity (226). He observed that Soviet workers, while they could not boast many material possessions, were assured that their medical care would be provided, and that they and their children would be guaranteed schooling. At the time, his American friends were just emerging from the Great Depression, and while they had many more possessions than their counterparts in the

Soviet Union, they also had more worries, about the high cost of living, medical care, taxes and schooling (227). In Scott's view, Soviet workers were winning the battle of industrialization. By making the comparison with the contemporary situation in the West, Scott must have caused his Western readers to pause and question the effectiveness of capitalism for their lives. Significantly, he credited Stalin alone for the winning of this battle: "Stalin's indomitable will and his ruthless tenacity were responsible for the construction of Magnitogorsk and the entire Ural and Western Siberial industrial areas. Without Stalin the job would not have been done" (65).

In the battle for the hearts and minds of the Soviet people, Scott found more ambiguities and nuances than on the industrialization front. After all, propaganda is often purposely misleading, and at times, Scott found himself agreeing with the messages he received. Making a comparison again with the West, Scott told of his amazement at the overwhelming abundance of consumer goods surrounding him on his visit to America in 1937, and his experience of being inundated with the advertising deemed necessary to convince people to buy these products. Contradicting the common Western perception that propaganda was a brain-washing scheme perpetrated only on the misfortunate peoples of Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, Scott turned the table on his American readers. He asserted that it was more edifying to receive the propagandistic message in Russia to study Communist thinkers, "to participate in civilian defense organizations, to increase production, lower costs, improve quality and to be vigilant," than to be told in America what brand of cigarette he should buy (228). It seems to have been a bit disingenuous, then, that Scott went on in his next paragraph to describe the excess of merchandise he bought in the West and brought back to his family in Magnitogorsk (228). Interestingly, upon his graduation from the Komvuz (a school, part of the Soviet literacy drive), Scott was offered the opportunity to join the Communist Party and become a propagandist. His comment upon his refusal to do so reveals something of the ambivalent nature of John Scott: "It is all very well to be taught things one does not believe or accepts with reservations; it is quite a different matter to teach these things to others" (138). He seems to have employed a healthy skepticism toward propaganda, yet he did not reject it out of hand or deny its usefulness.

This ambivalence on the part of Scott was reflected more saliently when he hinted at his own attitudes toward Stalin's purges in the mid- to late 1930's. Scott offered several causes for the purges, and he intimated his belief that purging was an expedient for achieving a nationalist/socialist state. For instance, one reason the purges may have been necessary, according to Scott, was that the Party had so many enemies, beginning with the Tsarist holdovers, and including dispossessed kulaks and business men. Scott reasoned that these many internal enemies were potential spies for foreign countries. Like Alexander Solzhenitsyn in his *Gulag Archipelago* (class handout), Scott recognized that the potential need for purging in the Communist Party appeared long before Stalin's time: the Bolsheviks, with their underground activities, secret police, and inability to deal with opposition, really engendered the necessity for purges even before the Revolution (188-9). Furthermore, Scott's description of a propagandistic theater performance, which blatantly encouraged the rooting out of *agents provocateur*, revealed a real fear on the part of the government of foreign infiltration into the Soviet Union, and the fear seems to have been shared by Scott: "It [the Soviet play] demonstrated the necessity for the entire population to cooperate with the authorities in apprehending foreign spies. On the other hand, it failed to point out the danger and tragedy involved in over-enthusiastic purging" (203). His tepid criticism of purging appears to be an understatement, especially in light of post-Stalinist revelations about the purges. Scott must be forgiven, however, as he, like most Soviet citizens at the time, had no idea of the enormity of the atrocities being committed on Stalin's behalf.

John Scott did not try to conceal his ideological sympathy for Stalinist Russia. Even after he left Magnitogorsk because of the danger to foreigners, he expressed clearly his view that Russia was right; the country was on the progressive road to a "new society"; "a society which would guarantee its people not only personal freedom, but absolute economic security; a society for which it was worth while to shed blood, sweat, and tears" (248). Again, the comparison with the West was

implied, with the West looking the worse for it, and again, Churchill's patriotic words were applied to the people of the Soviet Union. Apparently, John Scott became a propagandist after all. This conclusion is reinforced when one reads the addenda provided to Scott's book by editor, Stephen Kotkin. One wonders how one can reconcile the above quote from Scott's book, written for an American readership, with these words, given by John Scott to the U.S. State Department in 1938: "The future of the Soviet Union does not look bright to me" (301). He went on to tell the U.S. Government that more propaganda was, in his opinion, the solution to the demoralization occurring from the purges in the Soviet Union; propaganda to reiterate socialist ideals would reinforce the strength of the Party (301). Additionally, in a separate briefing in 1938, Scott gave the U.S. government a detailed account of the backgrounds and political situations of the groups of laborers with whom he worked. They were all prisoners of different types: kulaks who had been dispossessed in the Collectivization, refugees, petty criminals, and prisoner specialists who had been sent to Magnitogorsk for their special knowledge, but who were not trusted politically. He told the State Department how these groups lived in Magnitogorsk, how they were treated, and how their various groups endured the purges. In his book, Scott mentioned several individuals from these groups whom he had encountered, but in his briefing to the government, he gave a much clearer picture of the context in which they lived and the enormity of Soviet reliance on prison labor (280-9). He revealed too, that propaganda was effective with the semi-literate groups, but was hardly used with the better educated, apparently because the Soviet government knew it would be a waste of effort (285). It seems that Scott gave his Government interrogators a broader and more pessimistic view of Stalinist Russia, while painting a rather more idealistic picture in his book for the general American public, perhaps reasoning cynically, like the Soviets, that certain messages are more effective with a more naïve readership. The year 1942 provided Scott with an opportunity to capitalize on the patriotic sentiment present in America and try to evoke some sympathy for socialism in the Soviet Union. Although Scott said in the end that "Westerners have no place in Russia" (248), Russia seemed to have found a place in John Scott; Stalin taught him how to use the power of message.

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