

A WORKMAN IN RUSSIA

BY ARTHUR GOLDHAMMER

[We add this to our reports from Russia because it comes from the pen of a workman who lived and labored under the Soviet régime; and because it is published in a Socialist newspaper not likely to print a prejudiced account of conditions in that country.]

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FOR about two years I held the post of mechanical instructor among the Bashkirs, a Mongol tribe in southeastern Russia. During that period I was for two months in Moscow and for five months in Petrograd, spending the rest of the time in the districts of Samara, Ufa, and Orenburg. I have resided in the country and in the Bashkir villages in southeastern Russia. I have traveled by cart and by sledge throughout this region, in close intimacy with the common people. Since there are no hotels, I have lodged and eaten with peasants and mechanics in their own homes. I have talked with all classes over many a glass of tea, and feel that I know what the people are suffering and thinking far better than do our good comrades who spend a few weeks on some official mission, comfortably housed in the Soviet capital.

At the outset let me say that the dictatorship of the proletariat is only on paper. In reality there is a dictatorship over the proletariat. People sing the *International* with great enthusiasm at public meetings; they pass resolutions dictated by the Soviet government; they decide to perform volunteer service Saturday afternoons and Sundays. But if you talk with them privately after the meeting is over, everyone will begin to curse the present government.

How does this happen? Russia is ruled by terror. No one dares to say in public what he really thinks. Were he to do so, he would be dealt with speedily by the Extraordinary Commission, which is the Holy Inquisition of the Soviet government.

In the spring of last year I was living at Sterlitamak, the capital of Bashkortistan, as the Bashkir 'Republic' is officially called. I was working at the central printing office. We were supposed to be given twenty-five pounds of flour a month; but had not received a particle for more than two months. After vainly demanding their legal flour quota, the workers finally delivered an ultimatum to the proper authorities, threatening to stop work unless they were given provisions within three days. The next morning several high Communist officers arrived, armed from head to foot, — for no Communist travels about Russia in any other way, — and coolly told us that, if we struck, our shop committee would be thrown into prison and the rest of us sent to the front. What could we do under such conditions? Our only resort was to trade our last garments with some peasant for enough grain to support life.

In Petrograd I lodged and took my meals in the old Hotel Angleterre, where we had a so-called 'house com-

munity,' consisting for the most part of petty Soviet employees. The steam-heating apparatus was always cold, and we did n't even have fuel regularly for the kitchen. Naturally our dining-room was unheated. The steam from the hot soup, which was cooked in the same room, would gather on the cold ceiling in drops, and fall down on the table and on the heads of the diners. We ate our meals wrapped in rags and furs, always shivering with cold. The meals consisted of a starvation portion of cabbage soup, with now and then a potato cooked in the jacket.

Now let me compare this with Hotel Astoria, where the head Communists held forth. I went there on official duty frequently. Every room was heated, including the hallways. The elevator was running; there was hot water in the bathrooms. In the dining-room they served bread, butter, ham, sausage, and chocolate. The electric light was in service all night long.

During the five months I was in Petrograd there was not a single ration of meat issued; not even on the second anniversary of the inauguration of the Soviet government, which was made a great national festival.

In the country the people are in rags. I have been in Bashkir villages where there were families which had only enough clothing for a single person. When that person went abroad the others had to stay in their huts, literally naked. This is not so surprising when one recalls that the Bashkirs were miserably poor, even before the war. A yard of cloth sells for from 2000 to 2500 rubles, a price, of course, utterly beyond their reach. During the two years of Soviet rule the government has issued to the Bashkirs about two yards of cloth per capita.

Last summer I decided to use my month's vacation for a trip to Petrograd. It took all my time for four days

to get the necessary papers, and by the time they were completed, they contained eighteen different signatures. Although the peasants have not enough draft animals to cultivate their fields, horses and carts and drivers are constantly requisitioned by the authorities. In our little town at least one hundred and fifty outfits were in constant use, carrying about our new bureaucrats. Higher officials use automobiles.

In the evening, people light their homes with pine-knots, for they have no candles or petroleum. Class-distinction is more exaggerated than ever. In our little town the Soviet commissar's family occupied six or eight rooms in a former bourgeois residence, and kept servants; but the working-people have mostly to sleep six or eight in a room, lying on the floor like pigs. I personally was unable to get any housing accommodations whatever, and finally took refuge in an old stable.

Originally the Soviet government provided fairly well for its soldiers. They received a pound and a half of bread, and half a pound of meat or fish, besides tea, sugar, and tobacco. However, to-day the soldiers who are not in active service are no better off than the others. It is not uncommon to find soldiers begging, and in Moscow they haunt the railway station trying to trade parts of their uniform for food. It is not surprising, therefore, that one sees everywhere highly colored posters calling upon deserters to return to their units. In many districts these deserters have formed bands, and go through the country robbing right and left. In June, 1920, I was ordered to a little town some two hundred miles to the east of Sterlitamak, where I had previously been staying. During my sojourn at this new post, eleven persons were murdered by robbers in the immediate vicinity. In one case a priest and his two grown-up daughters were killed in

broad daylight on a country road, and stripped of every article of clothing. No one ventured to travel abroad alone. We made our journeys in regular caravans. The peasants were so terrified that they did not dare to go into the fields to cut their hay. Whole villages were sometimes plundered by these robber bands mainly for the purpose of obtaining clothing.

At Temjassovo, the place I have just mentioned, free trade prevailed when I arrived. Meal was comparatively cheap, or 1500 rubles a pood. About two weeks later a detachment of Soviet troops arrived and forbade selling in the open market. The result was, we had to buy food on the sly, and flour at once rose to 6000 rubles a pood. Since practically no government rations were issued, and most of the grain used in this vicinity has to be brought a long distance from the Cossack country, the result was to raise the cost of living about three hundred per cent.

In some respects the peasants are the best off in Russia. To say the least, they generally have enough to eat. But the majority of them farm just as they did in the days of our ancestors. Any modern agricultural machinery they may have had has long since worn out. The use of fertilizers is unknown, and there is little rotation of crops. However, the soil is naturally fertile and generally produces something. But shortly before the harvest a government commission appears and appraises the anticipated crop, and in consultation with the village Soviet sets the amount of grain which the place must deliver to the government. The village Soviet then proportions this levy among families of the village. Peasants are paid a ridiculously low price in Soviet paper for what they deliver. Since the peasant must pay enormous prices for everything that he or his family uses, which is not produced on his farm, he is

forced to resort to illegal trade to get it. A horseshoe or a few nails cost hundreds of rubles. A rude country wagon such as they use in that region costs more than 100,000 rubles. A pair of top-boots costs 30,000 rubles; an old soldier's overcoat, 15,000. The result is, the peasant has taken to raising only enough grain to feed his family, and a little flax and hemp in addition. The spinning-wheel and the hand-loom are returning to the peasant's cabin, and the people have gone back to customs of a century or more ago. I have often seen men light their cigarettes with flint and steel.

One meets on the highway caravans of two hundred carts or more, mostly driven by young boys of twelve years, or by the wives and daughters of the peasants, while the husbands are at home tilling the land. These are carts requisitioned by the government to transport grain, forage, and other produce to the nearest railway station.

In addition there are innumerable government commissions, inspectors, agents, officers, and soldiers, constantly going back and forth, and demanding transportation from the village Soviets. This is a fearful burden for the farming population. It is very similar to the old feudal burdens. Let me give one example. In the spring of 1920, I was ordered to go to a certain railway station to get some printing presses and bookbinding machinery received from Petrograd. I was allotted twelve cavalry guards and requisitioned, in the vicinity of the little town where I was staying, nearly two hundred sleds. Although I pointed out beforehand that we could not haul this machinery on sleds, because the snow was mostly gone and such heavy loads could not be transported in this manner, we were sent off on our journey of sixty miles. The result was what I expected. We came back six days later, with our sleds

empty, after a perilous and fatiguing trip through fathomless mud and flooded rivers. Since there was no forage or food along the road, and none of us had brought enough provisions, we reached home half-starved. The remarks I heard during that expedition, from the peasants who accompanied me, consisted wholly of complaints and profanity heaped upon the Bolsheviks. The things said were not repeatable. Let me add, that the next time I was at the railway station, six months later, the machinery was still lying there. A steam-engine and a boiler shipped from Petrograd lay exposed to the weather, and are probably there yet, buried in the snow, as I pen these lines.

Everyone has heard that the factories and workshops of Russia are nationalized. The only exceptions are a few small establishments which are run by old coöperative groups. Every employee must belong to a union, and two per cent is deducted from his wages for union fees. The only purpose I ever knew these unions to serve was to provide jobs for their officials. I was a member of a union in Sterlitamak, which had in round numbers four hundred members. But it was a trade-union only in name. We were not allowed to do anything to better our own conditions, and we could not strike. Naturally, under such a system production declined, and a premium system had been introduced. For instance, the wage established by law for a pressman on bookwork in our office was 2002 rubles a month. Taking a case where such a pressman works on a toggle-joint press No. 3, with a foot-treadle, he is expected to print three hundred impressions an hour. He himself has to feed the press, but is given an assistant at the treadle. If he has no assistant, his stint is twenty-five per cent less. Now, if a printer turns out three hundred impressions hourly with a helper, or two

hundred and twenty-five impressions alone, he is given a bonus of one hundred per cent — that is, 4004 rubles a month, instead of 2002 rubles. The bonus is increased for any excess above this. All such premium tariffs are regulated by law, and are supposed to give the employees enough money to enable them to buy part of their necessities in the open market.

So far as this open-market matter goes, conditions vary in every city. In Moscow, for instance, you can buy in the principal markets everything your heart desires, if you have enough five-thousand and ten-thousand ruble notes in your pocket. But there are other places where nothing is to be purchased in that way. What usually happens is that trade is allowed to go on merrily for a few days, and then the police and soldiers suddenly raid the market-place and arrest all the able-bodied sellers and buyers, and send them off to some unremunerated labor. All the goods in the market are confiscated by the soldiers.

This does not discourage the traffickers, however; on the next day, everything will start afresh, the only difference being that prices will be higher than before. If the government really wanted to stop this kind of trade, it doubtless could do so. The provisions and goods that are sold and bartered are mostly stolen. The amount of property carried off illegally from government factories and warehouses and public kitchens is incredible. But people could not live otherwise. At Sterlitamak, for instance, a week's fuel costs about the wages of a workman for two months.

Let me say in closing that the disposition of the Russian people has completely changed. They are no longer the good-natured, helpful, hospitable peasants and workers we used to know. They have become cruel, pitiless, un-

sympathetic, unfeeling egoists. That is the effect of your Communism, as you have it in Russia, upon human nature. The bourgeoisie have disappeared. In the old times most of the people in Rus-

sia lived miserably; but a minority lived well. Now we have the same conditions; only a greater majority lives miserably, and a smaller minority — of Soviet officials — lives well.

THE SHOWMAN'S STORY

BY R. A. K.

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As we sat in the bar-parlor of the little inn, we could hear the strains of competing steam organs subdued by the distance to a dream-like melody. My friend the showman set down his glass with loving care.

'Talkin' of monkeys —' he began. (As a matter of fact we had been discussing an uncle of mine, but I let it pass.)

'Talkin' of monkeys,' he said, 'p'raps you ain't aware that when it comes to real, straightforward sense a monkey can lay it over almost anythin'. There's some as takes a set on dogs, there's other some takes a set on 'osses, an' I once knew a feller as took a set on sparrers; but for all-round, day-out-an'-day-in thoughtability a monkey can tackle the best in the championship class.'

I held my breath, knowing that the slightest distraction is apt to put the showman off before he gets properly under way.

'Of course, there's monkeys an' monkeys. Some's cleverer than others, an' some's not clever at all. There was Old Josh —'

He paused like a clock running down, so I murmured, 'There was Old Josh?'

'Well, this Old Josh was a big chimpanzee as I bought cheap off a chap that

went broke into liquidation — or owing to it. First of all he drank the heliphunt, then he drank the camel, an' at finish he drank the chimpanzee. Right from the very first onset me an' Old Josh took quite a fancy to each other. He had a good principle about him — nothin' mean or behindhand. Live an' let live was his motto, which he stuck to right on an' reg'ler. After business hours he'd put on a cast-off coat of mine, take his clay pipe out of the right-hand pocket, an' sit there smokin' as comfortable as a third-class ticket in a first-class carriage. But one peculiarity about this monkey was that he did n't have no great opinion of human bein's. According to him, human bein's could n't do nothin' right. There was his bed, f'r instance. No matter how you tried, you'd never satisfy him. The way he used to carry on about that bed was a fair lesson to any Christian.

"Look at it," he used to say, as it were; "just look at it. Who the blazes can sleep on a bed like that?" an' he'd start fixin' it for himself, grumbling all the while — not bad-tempered, mind you, but fair disgusted. Or it might be bernarners. Very fond of bernarners was Consul —'