

# Seeing Is Believing

META BERGER

**I**T WAS a tough-minded delegation of twelve Americans that the Friends of the Soviet Union drew from the American trade union movement for the annual visit to Russia this spring—a fair sampling of trade-union economics and self-conscious socialist determination not to be corrupted by entertainment.

As we came to know each other crossing the Atlantic, I had room for a little sympathy with the Russian trade unions which were to be hosts to us.

We were determined not to be fooled. We would take our hospitality with salt. We had all been warned that we'd see only what we were supposed to see. Well, we'd show them. The idea rode like a bit in our minds as we approached Russia.

There were ten men and two women in the American delegation. The women were Socialists and mindful of the treatment of their Socialist comrades in the early years of the revolution. The men were trade unionists, excepting for one doctor (a Socialist also) and two farmers. Their idea of the class struggle, for the most part, was limited to a feeling that strikes were all right. They were all honest, forthright people who had worked hard for the chance to go to Russia. Organized labor in America is not passionately curious about Russia. The handful of delegates went without benefit of support at home. One of them had lost his job for coming. Another was sure he would lose his when he returned.

We had all prepared questions from our several points of view—the miner's, the textile worker's, the farmer's, the doctor's, the librarian's, the teacher's, the Negro's and the Socialists—with some of them reminiscent of old I. W. W. experiences and some of them incredibly naive and many of them betraying bourgeois American prejudices. We pooled them, a dozen pages in all. "How much do miners pay for fuel? . . . Can a miner who is a foreman in the anthracite region in America become a foreman in Russia? . . . What is the relation of the Communist Party to the miners? . . . Are the daughters of miners forced into white slavery as in the U. S. A.? . . . How much time do children spend with parents? . . . Is there as much affection between children in the Soviet Union as in other countries? . . . How are prescriptions filled? . . . Does the Soviet Union write or sell any form of life insurance? . . ."

(Later, when Kalinin, president of the Soviet Union, read them he scolded us roundly for the stupidity and naivete of many of them. We replied that we had come to learn and reminded him of Lenin's injunction

to be patient. It all ended good-naturedly.)

The enthusiastic welcome including a jazz band (jazz, mind you, to make us feel at home) with which we were greeted in Leningrad, might have thawed the purposes of a less determined group, but not ours. We looked at the throngs of hurrying people in the streets and asked sharply why they were so poorly clad and had only rags for shoes. Our interpreters quickly reassured us.

"These are just the clothes for work," they told us. "Wait until tonight—or go this afternoon to a park or house of culture. You will see. We all now have at least one good outfit."

And we found that what they said was true. The people in the moving picture theaters, in the opera, in the cafes at night were as well dressed as the audience in a neighborhood theater in America.

So it was with everything. We yielded enthusiasm cautiously. They gave us books of beautifully printed statistics, showing graphically their achievements. We struggled against the impression the statistics made on us.

"These are *your* figures," we said, remembering how we would probably be misled. "Prove them."

When they cheerfully promised to show us, we said we wanted to see for ourselves and they agreed to let us alone for some independent investigation (one of our number spoke Russian). One night we dispersed without guides and went into any homes in which we wished to question the workers, and see for ourselves.

Even allowing for the fears and suspicions with which people living under a dictatorship must view inquiring travelers, we all concluded that the Bolsheviks had not only put their system over, but they had made it stick.

**E**XCEPTING for this one night, the Russians showed us. They showed us all of the superlative things for which the new Russia has already become famous; the biggest dam, the biggest library, the biggest farms in the world, the most beautiful and entertaining parks, museums, workers' summer resorts in the Crimea, workers' apartments where once the mud dog-huts had been the homes of miners. They showed us the old slums and the new housing areas, they took us into mines using the most modern equipment where lately there was only the pick-axe. We cleaned our shoes before we went into a pig-house on a new state farm and we saw the beautiful new subway which taxed chemical as well as engineering

genius in its construction. They showed us nursery schools as modern as any in America, self-managing reformatories, scientific laboratories, the Russian Hollywood. Everywhere they pointed the comparison of the new life and the old. Then they showed us countless plans and programs for more parks, more factories, more of the good life for the workers. They showed us until our eyes and backs and legs ached and some of us grumbled that there ought to be an eight-hour day for visitors. Then, when our senses were saturated, they urged us to the opera or the theater which is giving the workers their first taste of culture. It is only in retrospect that the realization of the daring and labor of these achievements is possible. At the time, there was so much to understand. I remember particularly one beautiful new railroad station (in Kiev). In the magnificent and spacious waiting room the peasants lay in clumps on the floor, their bundles on the benches. Again and again the swiftness and vastness of the new life of the Russian people came to us in a fresh, visual, impact.

They showed us as much as they could crowd into our days and nights and they told us what we could not see—of the rise of wages (37 percent during the first five-year plan) and the fall in prices (35 percent) during the same period. So that life is constantly becoming easier for the workers. They told us that the wage level will rise 55 percent by 1937 and the price level drop accordingly. They told us that they had almost wiped out illiteracy and showed us that in 1917 only 33 percent of Russians could read and write, while now 90 percent can (and 95 percent in the cities). They gave us figures showing the reduction in infant mortality and occupational diseases. They insisted that Russia is the only country in the world in which the purpose of all industrial activity is to increase invention and mechanization so that the worker may work fewer hours and have more goods. They told us that the most elaborate safety devices were installed in all factories for workers' protection and that as a result the industrial accident rate was very low.

When they had finished (somehow that word is inappropriate for they never finished) they told us that we must neither judge them too harshly (because it was all far from complete) nor yet be too enthusiastic, because we would only hurt their cause.

**W**E CRITICIZED some of the things we saw. We found that in their museums of revolutionary history, the work and contributions of Trotsky were omitted. We asked how they could honestly erase

his name from that fierce history and they told us that he was a counter-revolutionary now, whose past usefulness must not be made into a present menace. We saw Lenin deified and we demurred that they were substituting one religion for another. One is the religion of science and activity, they said, the other is that of ignorance and death. We saw the picture of Stalin around every corner until, to our un-indoctrinated eyes, it was almost comical. He has helped us to live, they said. We saw people crowded still in inadequate rooms. There are only twenty-four hours a day for us to work, they said, and we knew that they used all the hours of day and night. We saw women doing heavy work and asked them why they did it, only to be told that they were quite free to enter any field and did this because they chose to.

The amazing thing to me is that coming from industrialized America where running water is (at least in the cities) a commonplace and where good roads and green vegetables have softened our pioneering spirit, we could have been so impressed by this new society which is still so raw and straining and incomplete. It was as though our understanding and sympathy were gradually enlarged. We felt new appreciations and reorganized our values. We lost some of our "dollar psychology." It happened slowly. I remember an incident in the theater where one of the group was indignant to be obliged to yield his place to a shock-brigader, honored by special privileges because of her good work for the state. Our man said indignantly that he had "money enough to buy out the whole row." Yes, in America, they said simply, but not in Russia. I remember my own horror and revulsion at sanitary conditions in the country—a disgust which made me forget for the moment that every thatched roof hut we passed in the long country stretches had two or three new windows—light and aid from the Bolsheviks to the peasants. Later, after I heard an eloquent speech by a Russian on the subject, I wrote a letter to the speaker acknowledging my error in over-valuing the importance of privies when bread and shelter and peace were such desperate considerations. Sanitation comes next. If the Russians attack the problem of plumbing as they have every other technical problem, we may be inviting their sanitary engineers to modernize our south.

Until we saw Russia some of us believed that no good could come of dictatorship—that nothing was worth the price that Russia had paid, no society could justify such terror and despotism. Now that we have seen Russia, we know that there are dictatorships and dictatorships. We have seen a country where the physical achievements alone merit great applause. But much more than these, where the spiritual and cultural achievements for the people as a whole evoked in us something much more stirring than respect. And

above all of these things, we have seen a dictatorship educating a new generation to participate in a democracy which is the denial of that dictatorship. Russian education today is calculated to equip the citizens of Russia not only with technical skill but with a consciousness of dignity and power, with a conviction that the dictatorship is transient and waiting upon them. Mr. Louis Fischer in a recent article has pointed the anomaly—a dictatorship which prepares for its own abdication.

Certainly, we concluded, this is not the same kind of dictatorship as that which burned the books, destroyed the labor unions, reduced the standard of living, prohibited scientific research, in Italy. Certainly it cannot be compared with the degenerate government of Germany which has silenced music, closed schools and run amok to terrify or mummify a nation. We Socialists saw in Russia a new culture, a unique security, and the socialization of wealth. We saw planned and daring collective activity for the collective good. That these results have been achieved at a great and tragic cost, we know. It was written in the faces of the older survivors as well as in their harsh history. But that the results are good, enviably good, we know too. All twelve of us know that for a working man, for a child of almost any class, for a woman of energy and ability, for a

scientist, Russia promises more opportunity, more appreciation, more security and hope than any other country in the world.

Nothing was asked us by our hosts. Sometimes we were suddenly aware of the incredulity of our guides who found us very naive, and sometimes we felt their friendly contempt. The new generation in Russia is as proud and as arrogant and sure of itself as only the ruling class is, elsewhere in the world. Our Russian friends were hospitable and helpful, but we were expected to show spirit and intelligence, and before the visit was over we were all trying to live up to those expectations.

After 4,500 miles of travel we reported that we were "amazed at the constructive energy"; we wrote of the "wonderful care and education you give your children" "the superior type of woman we have seen" "the encouragement of culture of national minorities" "the comprehensive social insurance" and we "rejoiced that the Soviet leaders have not been afraid to undertake tremendous tasks." We expressed our "deep admiration for the dauntless courage of those who fought the revolution, for the foresight of the leaders who could plan in the midst of chaos, for the heroic sacrifices of the workers."

In short, we came back from Russia as enthusiastic as our cynical friends had prophesied, in spite of ourselves.

## Harvard Swears

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THE old joke, "You can tell a Harvard man," should be amended to "You can't tell a Harvard professor." For it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between a member of the Harvard faculty and a member of this year's freshman class. Extreme immaturity of manner and the dewy beardlessness commonly associated with novices, choirboys, and melons at dawn, are about all that inform you that you are talking with a member of the professorial staff of Harvard.

The immaturity of Harvard professors was made strikingly evident the other night in New Lecture Hall, at a mass meeting called to protest the Teachers' Oath Act (Massachusetts Laws of 1935, Chapter 370). Under the new law, Massachusetts citizens who are teachers in public or private schools and colleges must take the oath of allegiance to the constitution required of army and navy officers and federal employees. The three main speakers: Kirtley F. Mather, professor of geology, James A. McLaughlin of the Law School faculty, and John R. Walsh, instructor in economics, were pretty obviously at a loss just what to do about the Act. Dr. Mather,

whose refusal to take the oath the week before brought roars from the reactionaries and cheers from the liberals, had later announced he would take the oath, but now wasn't quite sure, after all. Disarmingly he admitted that after having "made a face" he would probably have to take his medicine. Professor McLaughlin trounced the act as a "soap-bubble," and an "additional petty harassment of citizens," showing clearly that the loosely-worded statute failed to provide a penalty, then admitted after all that little could be done about it, and that it was better not to embarrass the University administration anyway. Mr. Walsh, after straightforwardly denouncing the Act, suggested coyly that faculty members should hire "somebody who knows his way around the legislature—well, a lobbyist, if you will," and get the measure repealed.

The question period arrived, and four hundred-odd Harvard students calmly and with a maturity conspicuously lacking in their elders took the meeting over. Not a general question was asked. There was work to be done: the election of a broad anti-oath committee, composed of students, faculty members, and—symptomatic of the situation!—even interested persons from "outside." Time and place were