

REVIEW AND COMMENT

Lion Feuchtwanger on the Soviet Union—Britain and the U.S.A.—Crime and corruption in the novel

YOU would be rather surprised, I imagine, if you picked up a biography of Cromwell and found four hundred pages devoted to the wart on his nose and only a footnote to say that he led the Puritan revolution. Yet this kind of fantastic reversal of values is the chief characteristic of André Gide's volume on the Soviet Union (*Return from the U.S.S.R.*). You will recall how the celebrated French novelist casually remarked that the Soviet Union has abolished the exploitation of man by man. A little thing like that is dismissed in a single sentence. But whole pages and chapters are reserved for more important considerations like the alleged laziness of the Russian people, the alleged suppression of free thought, and the alleged significance of a Georgian telegraph clerk who would not take a message to Stalin unless it included some hifalutin' salutation.

Now comes another celebrated European novelist with his impressions of the U.S.S.R.* Lion Feuchtwanger seems to be the kind of man who also sees the wart on Cromwell's nose, but he thinks it less important than the revolution. In contrast to Gide, he finds the abolition of exploitation far more significant than the incidental shortcomings. Through this rational emphasis of observable facts, we get a far truer picture of the Soviet Union, one which explains why 170,000,000 people are so passionately devoted to their new social system, and why their achievements so profoundly inspire millions of men and women the world over.

Feuchtwanger reports that everywhere in Moscow he found an atmosphere of harmony and contentment, even of happiness. The years of hunger are over; food is plentiful; clothing has improved. There are deficiencies in transportation and housing, but shortcomings are bearable in the Soviet scheme of things; the citizens know that their prosperity is the inevitable outcome of rational planning, that prosperity is there to stay, and that it will increase. The people feel secure about the future as well as the present. Experience of the past twenty years has confirmed the people's belief that their socialist country does not reserve the good things of life for a privileged few but makes them available to all. They know that the state is for them, not they for the state.

Where Gide was struck by the "arrogance" of the Soviet youth, Feuchtwanger perceived something greater and more fruitful. He found these young men and women reaping the first benefits of their Soviet upbringing, facing life with calm confidence, their strength coming from a feeling that they are organic parts of a purposeful whole.

As for freedom, Feuchtwanger is convinced

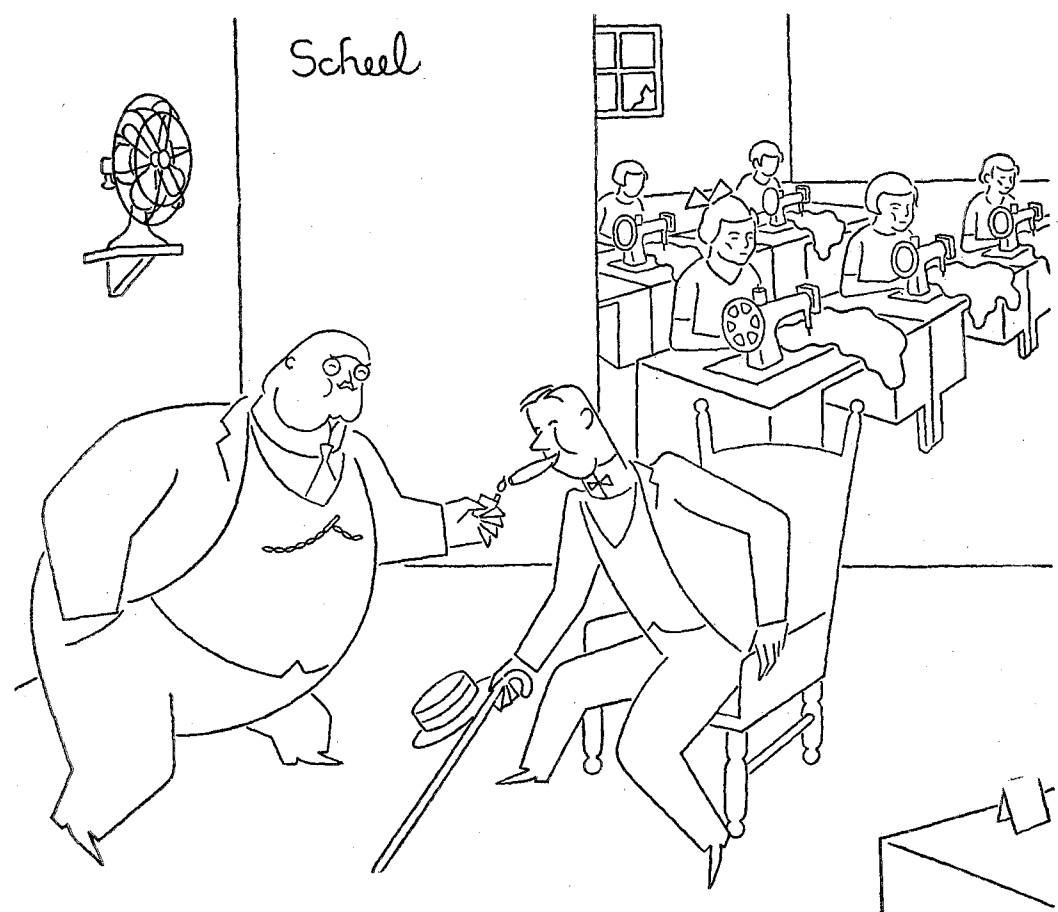
that the Soviet Union has gone far along the path toward socialist democracy. This conclusion is forced on him by the essentials, as distinguished from the warts, above all by the fundamental, revolutionary fact that the means of production are in the hands of the people, and not in the hands of a few individuals. Hence the real freedom which the Soviet citizen enjoys—freedom from unemployment, from a needy old age, from anxiety as to the future of his children.

When Feuchtwanger does dwell on shortcomings, he sees them in their setting, tries to understand their causes, and records the efforts to overcome them. He is disturbed by the "exaggerated veneration" of Stalin, as Gide was, but he knows, too, that in the great majority of cases the need of the people "to express their gratitude, their infinite admiration," is genuine. And he knows, too, that "it is manifestly irksome to Stalin to be idolized as he is." Feuchtwanger finds it vastly more important that Stalin—the most unpretentious of all the men in power he has ever known—is sincerely devoting his life to the realization of socialist democracy.

Feuchtwanger discussed the Moscow trials with Stalin and was impressed by the human aspects of the situation. Speaking of Radek, the Soviet leader remarked that "there is one eternally true legend, that of Judas." And the novelist adds that it was strange to hear

a man, otherwise so sober and logical, utter these simple, emotional words. But the author does not reduce the conflict to emotional terms; he remarks bluntly and truthfully that it is stupid to ascribe the Moscow trials "merely to Stalin's ambition and vengefulness." It is ridiculous to suppose that Stalin would prejudice his country's foreign policy, and thereby an important part of his work "from the personal motives which schoolboys attribute to the heroes of their historical essays." Feuchtwanger sees the political differences which led to the trials, and cites Lenin's illuminating observation that "Trotsky's anti-Bolshevist past is no accident." It is, to some extent, with political problems in mind that Feuchtwanger gives his eye-witness account of the Radek-Pyatakoff trial, though he includes a good deal of psychological explanation as well. For all its deficiencies, this chapter is an interesting contribution to the growing literature on the Moscow trials. The author, like every other eye-witness of that trial, was impressed by its authenticity. Moreover, he gives rational explanations of why the accused confessed and why their punishment was deserved.

Feuchtwanger does not conceal his own uncertainties with regard to various difficulties which still exist in the Soviet Union; but his sincere attempt to understand those difficulties and to state his limitations give him the moral



"I believe in giving youth a chance. I was young once myself."

* MOSCOW, 1937: MY VISIT DESCRIBED FOR MY FRIENDS, by Lion Feuchtwanger. Viking Press. \$2.

right to say that "the attitude which many Western intellectuals have adopted towards the Soviet Union is short-sighted and without merit."

Indeed, Feuchtwanger's own book has been a touchstone for the attitude of certain intellectuals. When Gide published his distorted picture of the U.S.S.R., it was hailed by certain literati as a masterpiece of style, observation, and sincerity. You would think that these same gentlemen would be at least courteously attentive to the testimony of another observer, himself a distinguished writer. Instead, they dismiss Feuchtwanger's report as nothing more than an inadequate reply to Gide. By their standards, style, observation, and sincerity are the monopoly of those who misrepresent the Soviet Union.

What is most significant about this double standard of appraisal is that it antedates current political controversies. From the very beginning, the reactionary press and certain confused intellectuals have had notorious stock responses to eye-witness accounts of Soviet life. We may take the case of Bertrand Russell as the classic example of the pattern involved. Throughout the World War, Russell was a liberal pacifist. But in the spring of 1920, he published an essay in this magazine wherein, with reservations to be expected from such a source, he came out for communism in general and the Soviet regime in particular. He announced that he did so after having faced all the implications of armed class-conflict.

The press ignored this confession of faith by the distinguished British scientist. In the fall of 1920, however, Russell returned from a visit to the Soviet Union, and published in the *Nation* his second thoughts on Bolshevism. He now confessed that he had gone to Russia believing himself a Communist, and had found that he was not. He had been shocked by what he had seen in that country, and concluded that "kindliness and tolerance are worth all the creeds in the world." This statement was all the more striking since Russell had visited Soviet Russia with the British trade union delegation which had found all its hopes and expectations more than borne out by actual contact with the first socialist republic.

When Russell visited the Soviet Union in 1920, Lenin was alive, at the height of his vigor. Stalin had not yet "betrayed" socialism as it is understood by Park Avenue and Max Eastman. Yet the disillusioned English philosopher now described the Bolshevik regime as a tyranny supported by the equivalent of the czarist police, in the shadow of whose menace ordinary mortals live in terror. He prophesied that in time this regime would resemble any Asiatic despotism. In short, the U.S.S.R. of Lenin aroused those confusions in Russell which seventeen years later the U.S.S.R. of Stalin was to arouse in Gide.

To complete the pattern, Russell fled from the realities of Soviet Russia, then engaged in civil war, to the illusions of bourgeois England. Anticipating the distorted homesickness of John Dos Passos by seventeen years, the



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philosopher announced that England had ever since 1688 been based on "kindliness and tolerance." The country he had in mind was the very one which had jailed him for moral opposition to the war, and which massacred the people of Ireland and India. From the frying-pan of a romantic notion of communism Russell fell into the fire of a romantic notion of capitalism.

This time the press was on its toes. Earlier, it had ignored Russell's faith in the Soviet Union; now it blazoned his disillusion in Lenin from coast to coast, without bothering to question causes or check conclusions. In the same way, seventeen years later, it ignored Gide's pro-Soviet writings but gave the fullest publicity to his melancholy misunderstanding of the U.S.S.R. And by the same token, certain editors and reviewers pay less attention to Feuchtwanger's saner observations and more mature reflections.

There is a line of shameful blindness, and often downright dishonesty, running through the anti-Soviet pamphleteers from John Spargo to Eugene Lyons, and a line of insight and hope from John Reed to Lion Feuchtwanger which experience confirms. For while confused intellectuals, caught in the morass of an earlier idealism from which they find it hard to extricate themselves, kept bewailing the deficiencies, the Soviet Union kept overcoming them; and while the nasty little liars ran to the reactionary papers with their cheap "inside dope" about Soviet life, the U.S.S.R. kept on developing and entrenching that great historic truth which has been its destiny.

That truth may naturally have been dim to many when Bertrand Russell returned tearfully from the U.S.S.R. Today, when fascism bombs cities on three continents, and the Soviet Union, triumphant in its socialist economy, stands as a bulwark of democracy and peace, there can be no excuse for the André Gides. Those who have tasted the blessings

of fascism—and Lion Feuchtwanger is one of them—know better what the real issues are. His experience of two worlds is condensed in the simple affirmation: "It does one good after all the compromise of the West to see an achievement such as this, to which a man can say yes, yes, yes, with all his heart."

JOSEPH FREEMAN.

American "Dependence"

ENGLAND EXPECTS EVERY AMERICAN TO DO HIS DUTY, by Quincy Howe. Simon & Schuster. \$2.00.

QUINCY HOWE, one-time editor of *Living Age*, has written a book with a message. He pleads, in brief, for the complete isolation of the United States in world affairs, especially on issues of war and peace. Towards that end, he proposes a mandatory neutrality act on the present style without the "cash-and-carry" clause as well as certain vague measures designed to make this country "self-sufficient."

In the development of his program, Mr. Howe hangs most of his arguments on the alleged domination of American policy, especially in foreign spheres, by the clever islanders. In his opinion, this country has been no more and no less than an innocent appendage of Great Britain and, more particularly, of the British Foreign Office. Presidents Wilson, Hoover, and Roosevelt had this much in common, according to Mr. Howe: they were all so many puppets with strings extending beyond the Atlantic into the City, Downing Street, and Buckingham. Because he dislikes this alleged dependence, he would entirely cut adrift from all international allegiances. Everything that looks like collective security or international coöperation is really a British snare. He reiterates at various points that the Communist International is blind to this situation and really agrees in its assumptions with reactionaries of various kinds. To escape from the ever-present Britishers, Mr. Howe advises us to escape from the world.

Sometimes Mr. Howe has to strain a point in order to fit the facts into his scheme. He readily admits that "It would be difficult to name any two countries that have fewer common interests or more points of difference than Great Britain and the United States." If so, why not conflict rather than a "coöperation" which always favors Britain? That this is a tough one may be gathered from Mr. Howe's solution. Alone among the great powers, the United States bases its policy not on "its natural resources, its social order, its population density, its technical equipment, and its geographic equipment," but rather "on an entirely different and quite intangible factor." The American ruling class has been hypnotized by "ancestral ties of language, tradition, and blood" to such extent that "it adapts its own selfish interests—not to mention the interests of the country as a whole—to the needs and desires of the British Foreign Office." Idealistic makeshifts of this kind