

Reading in Russia

By Mary Geisler Phillips

An adventure among the books and bookshops in the Soviet Union which shows what Russians are reading and what the old bookshops offer the traveller

IN the Soviet Union today there are over twenty-five millions of young people who have no memories of life before the October Revolution, who have never had the slightest contact with the outside world and who know nothing but hard, bare existence under the present régime. Since they are the future rulers of one-sixth of the earth's surface, it behooves us to watch them and to observe their reading. Their horizon is bounded by the barbed wire borders of their own country, and historically they are cut off from even their own past, since Russian history begins with the October Revolution of 1917,¹ hence their reading is somewhat restricted.

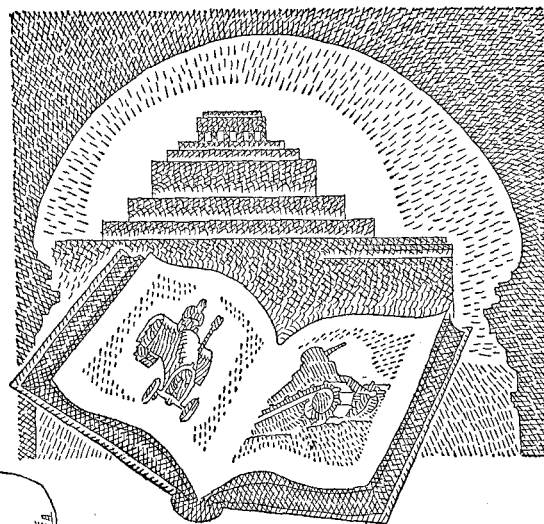
It is almost impossible not to read in Russia, for every available wall, indoors and out, is plastered with slogans, the sayings of Lenin, the six conditions of work of Stalin, or enthusiastic propaganda for the Five Year Plan. Apparently Russian eyes never tire of the color red and the Russian brain never lags over statistics, for around each red wall-chart depicting graphs and curves and figures showing the success of the plan, will be a cluster of young men and women deeply engrossed.

The government bookshops are the only stores bursting with wares of any kind; but there every shelf is full, for the Soviet publishing house puts out 35,000 books in one year, more than the number published in the United States in the same length of time. For a few copeks in Moscow one can buy treatises on nearly every subject under



the sun—medicine, engineering, pig culture, poultry culture, bee culture, books on the spy system, information on abortion, the works of Karl Marx, the life of Lenin, the history of the revolution. There is a notable lack of other history, with all the centuries of Russian life under the Czars ignored, and the tale of the rise and fall of other civilizations does not yet exist for these people. Few books are concerned primarily with the arts, probably because the printing house is too busily occupied supplying the demands for information on heavy industry. Most of the books in the government shops are printed on poor pulp paper, with paper backs, but they are new and fresh and they sell like hot cakes to the workers who are avid for knowledge of all sorts.

I watched the two Russians with us one day to see what sort of books they would choose to buy. One, whose specialty is natural science, went to the counter where the books on mathematics were gathered. He chose two abstruse treatises, discarding one because it cost a ruble (about seven cents),



the one bought being a thin volume bound in paper and costing ten or twelve copeks, not quite a penny. Then he turned over many books on zoology, pointing out those by English and American authors recently translated into Russian. Later on we were astonished to see for sale Russian copies of United States Department of Agriculture Bulletins, one window before a bookshop being completely filled with our federal bulletins on bee-keeping and chicken-raising.

The other friend with us that day was a young Jew who had not learned to read Russian until he was nineteen years of age. He went immediately to the fiction counter where paper backs flaunted lurid pictures in red and yellow, and chose two of the gayest. More customers patronized that counter than any of the others, and I saw one man following a title with his finger and spelling it laboriously under his breath. Our Jewish friend explained that these blood and thunder stories always carry some Communistic doctrine nicely wrapped up in the plot, but that you can skip that part! We saw these pulp-magazine tales being devoured on the street-cars by boys and girls, and while we were on the road from Moscow to the Black Sea, our friend consumed about one a day, rushing to the book stall at a railway station after filling the inevitable teapot.

All the customers in the bookshop were young, but then one sees few old or middle-aged persons about anywhere, and it was noticeable that no women were buying books. Perhaps they have less time for reading, since they must work outside the home seven

¹ Since writing this, I have seen in a newspaper that plans are being formulated for introducing earlier history as well as world geography into the Russian schools. I have been unable to discover whether this is authentic information.

hours a day and then like their sisters all over the world, probably have household chores to do as well.

We were eager to find out whether any American literature, aside from technical texts and government bulletins, were being read. There was nothing in the new bookshop, which was not unexpected since we realized the attitude taken by the ruling Communists toward "bourgeois" and capitalistic literature. O. Biha, writing in English for the magazine *Literature of the World Revolution*, says that "outside the Soviet Union, there is only in Germany an extensive literature which is ideologically and organizationally connected with the proletariat," and they will have nothing to do with literature concerning any other class. Mr. Biha truly says that "the entire literature of proletarian writers is agitation and propaganda for the revolutionary movement"—the movies we saw, the magazines we read, even the daily papers were nothing but lessons in Communism, and deadly dull most of them were.

Nevertheless, art for art's sake will some day flourish in the Soviet Union, according to B. Ettinhof, Assistant Chief of the Art Sector in the People's Commissariat for Education of the RSFSR, who explains the active interest "of the many million worker and peasant masses," and their yearning to participate in the various forms of art. However he goes on to say that "in the main, art must with every powerful means of mass influence inherent to it aid in the raising of mass consciousness, in the organizing of the mass will, mind, enthusiasm for the great social reforms, for socialistic construction going on in our country, for international socialist education. Such are the main aims of art according to the Five Year Plan."

Whether a culture so harnessed and restricted can ever produce literature that will "intensify experience and make moments beautiful or terrible beyond the comprehension of a cool outside observer," books that will bring "an ecstatic sense of life," remains to be seen.

We asked many of the Russians whom we met whether they had read any of our American writers, and learned that Upton Sinclair's works are popular. We found too that a few had read *Babbitt*, and hoped to have more of Sinclair Lewis's novels. To our surprise,

the most popular book by an American author seems to be *The Life of Henry Ford*. The Muscovites spoke with such scorn of our capitalists, Rockefeller and Morgan being the two names they knew, that I remarked,

"But don't you consider Henry Ford a capitalist?"

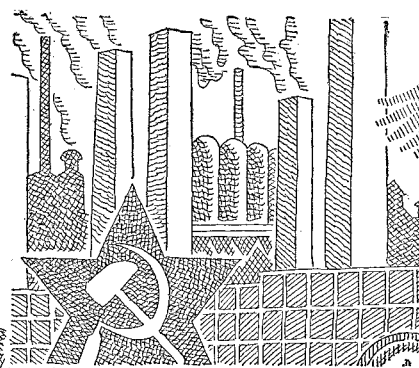
"Henry Ford? He is a worker!" was the enthusiastic response. Either Ford himself or his Russian publisher must be remarkably astute to be able to present this man in such a light that in spite of his millions he is still accepted as a fellow worker in the Soviet Union.

There is no doubt that the youth of Russia is reading, and that he is receiving from his books a distorted image of the world in which he lives. What this will do to the mass psychology we shall see in the next decade when the leadership of the country passes into the hands of today's boys and girls.

We had not been long in Russia before we felt the need of books to ease the strain of living in this new country, where, as a Soviet writer puts it, "life is boiling." The "boiling" that we did was mostly exasperation over interminable delays; with Great Russians, Tartars, Kurds, Ukrainians, Gypsies and others of the 185 nationalities making up the Soviet Union, we were forever standing in line.

"Let's find a second-hand bookstore," I said. "Then at least we'll have something to do while we wait."

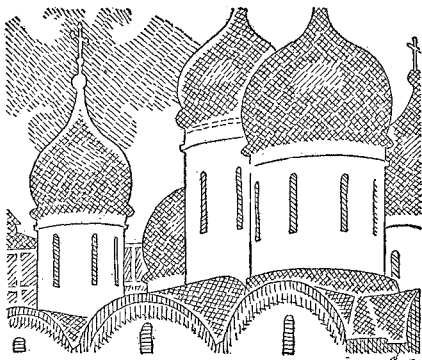
I thought of the entrancing book stalls along the Seine, and had a homesick pang for that peaceful spot in Philadelphia, Leary's Old Book Shop, where one can browse for hours undisturbed and where rare treasures are often unearthed. The last thing I bought there was Henry James's *The Two Magics*—oh, if I could find something like that in Russia! I thought of these things as we followed the turnings of the Chinese wall, pushing through the usual throng of the proletariat, hunting a bookshop. I never walked the streets of Moscow without wondering where the intelligentsia walk, all the gently nurtured, the educated, the refined, for they are rarely encountered on the streets.



But this day we discovered where they lurk. From the turmoil of swarming streets, we stepped inside a shop and immediately felt at home. Here was the same lack of air and light, here was the unruffled calm of all old book-stores. And before the piles of books in happy disorder stood absorbed readers in spectacles, the same sort of bookworms that stand before the ten-cent shelves or one-franc stalls the world over. The few people placidly reading in this dim room in Moscow were actually middle-aged!

We made for the shelves where books in English rubbed elbows with French literature—seven rows full, reaching to the ceiling and necessitating a climb on the ladder. Many times I have discovered a precious volume tucked away on a top shelf, out of the reach of the grasping hands of older bookworms whose creaking joints keep them on the ground level, but this top shelf revealed merely a First Year Algebra, a textbook on metallurgy, another on mining, and three old medical books—nothing to make one forget the sights and sounds and smell of train travel.

The next shelf was more promising for it began with *Alice in Wonderland*, inscribed on the fly-leaf "To Jean, from Mamma." Who was Jean and how could she bear to leave *Alice* behind her? Perhaps the book had inadvertently fallen behind a shelf, or perhaps in packing there was not room for everything and the unenlightened packers did not realize that of all books to leave behind on foreign soil, *Alice* is the last! I shall never know, but I like to think of some little English Jean reading *Alice* on the banks of the Moscva. Next to this book stood *The Wide, Wide World*, an old-timer I had not seen for many years. On the fly-leaf, in round,



childish hand, I read, "For Sister." Well, Sister, did you, even as I, mingle your tears with Ellen's when "the floodgates of Ellen's heart were opened and she wept?" You were wise, Sister, to leave Ellen to the oblivion of the musty shop; you could learn much more about the wide, wide world without her and her tears.

Red-bound volumes of *The Rover Boys* came next, and beside them, three volumes of *The Vassar Girls Abroad*. I had no desire to meet the Vassar Girls in England, Holland or Italy after gazing at their buxom forms with wasp waists and leg-o'-mutton sleeves, each girl equipped for European travel with a parasol.

The shelf below this one yielded ten or twelve of the Tauchnitz edition of old favorites. I passed by Ouida, Sir Walter Scott, Washington Irving, and picked up *Lorna Doone* and several of E. F. Benson's novels. I shall never forget the strange contrast of reading these books in a "hard carriage" traveling over the monotonous steppes. *Lorna Doone* proved enthralling enough to make one forget the sensation that one's bones were coming through to the uncompromising wooden bench, but the society novels of Benson seemed thin and unreal, far removed from this virile world where the amenities of the drawing room and the insouciant trifling of lovers are unknown.

On the counters of the bookshop were a few English books of more recent date, not yet relegated to the limbo of the upper shelves, and there my heart was warmed by a thumbled copy of *The Yale Review*. Beside it,

hobnobbing in the way of the sociable Westerners, were the catalogs of the University of Arizona and the University of Wisconsin. How in the world did these three drift together in this strange corner?

In Kharkov, just a square away from our hotel, was a low building, shrinking back from the sidewalk, its big window dimmed with cobwebs, its door always hospitably open. It was so near that it was possible to say, when a long delay seemed imminent:

"I'll be waiting at the second-hand bookshop at the corner."

Once there, I would step down the single grimy step to mull over books so thick with dust that one wondered how long it had been since other fingers touched them. I found a book that I wanted badly, an enormous tome in leather, containing the choicest pictures from *Punch* for several years. I might have had that big, whimsical book for five dollars, and a Russian could have bought it with his roubles for seventy cents, but it would not go into the rucksack, so reluctantly I gave it up. One day, while looking for maps among portfolios that yielded nothing but steel engravings—"The Stag at Eve," "Othello" and "Charlotte Corday"—I saw with envy an old Russian whose greasy hair lay on the greenish collar of his shiny coat, handling a folder of colored etchings. They were exquisite things, sketches of various types, a Russian priest, a Cossack, a Gypsy—I saw them all as I looked greedily over his shoulder, and I meanly hoped that he would not have money enough to buy them all. But the clerk was contemptuous of them and sold the lot for a mere copek or two. After the old man left, with the light of a treasure finder in his eye, I opened the folder. Not one of the lovely Russian etchings was left, nothing there but a few Parisian fashion plates, "La Revue de la Mode," dated 1881, 1887, 1889. I smiled to think that then as now in other countries women were concerned mightily about styles of

dress, while at present in the Soviet Union, the least important thing about a woman is her gown.

Our choicest find in the little bookshop of Kharkov bore a gold crown above the imperial double eagle on the faded red backs of its two volumes entitled, *Free Russia*, by William Hepworth Dixon, published in London in 1870. The frontispiece, labelled, "Convent of Solovetsk in the Frozen Sea," is in color, the onion-shaped pinnacles in bright green, the towers topping the high wall in red, the water of the foreground very blue, with white gulls sailing in the sky.

The preface to this fascinating book of travel begins, "*Svobodnaya Rossiya—Free Russia*—is the word on every lip in that great country; at once the Name and Hope of the new empire born of the Crimean War. In past times Russia was free even as Germany and France were free. She fell before Asiatic hordes; The Tartar system lasted in spirit, if not in form, until the war; but since that conflict ended, the old Russia was born again. This new country—hoping to be pacific, meaning to be free—is what I have tried to paint."

Much of that paragraph might have been written of Russia today with the change of just a few words, and from the light shed by Dixon upon the Russian people our journey was greatly illuminated. The villages he describes are exactly like dozens we passed through; the characteristics, the virtues and vices that he depicts are those we likewise observed among the Russians. Indeed, we were amazed to find how little the lower layer of society, particularly outside the great cities, has changed since the half century or more ago of which he writes. The priests and monks have disappeared, the monasteries are closed, the aristocracy and the rich merchants have vanished, but the peasants, over 80 per cent of the population, live and work and think just as they did then and are only beginning to be stirred by the onslaught of shock brigades, *kolkhozes* and *sovkozes*. But they are beginning to read, and the day may yet come when they will change habits and characteristics centuries old!

In a coming number: "Seamen: Soviet Style" by Desmond Holdridge.

LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES

TRUE TALES OF
LIFE AROUND US



Dividends and Stevedores

By Donald Mackenzie Brown

A small investor learns about strikes by witnessing scenes of violence and talking with strikers, scabs, bankers, and economists

As I entered the fog-laden San Francisco warehouse district on the morning of July 5, 1934, there seemed to be little out of the ordinary in the life of the city. Only the frequent squads of pickets reminded one that the fifty-seven-day-old longshoreman's strike was still in progress. My car was stopped by a police cordon and shunted up to Fourth Street. There I saw a long line of red trucks emerging from the back of one of the buildings. These were the strike-breakers, carrying out the port-opening plan of the San Francisco Industrial Association. How closely each truck followed the other, and how carefully the drivers seemed to keep their faces turned from the watching picket lines; perhaps it would be unhealthy to be recognized. But it all seemed safe at the moment.

Leaving this scene I drove up Harrison Street to the top of Rincon Hill, commanding a view of the south waterfront and the Embarcadero along the Pier 38 section. As I walked toward the mixed crowds assembled there, an object whined ominously overhead and crashed into a wooden frame building on the street corner. I turned in time to see two little girls duck inside a window. Some one laughed. At the same time I caught the sound of gun-fire over the hill. The more cautious of the crowd began moving away with nervous steps; the movement was contagious and the mob poured away from the crest looking backward expectantly

—some laughing. These were not the strikers, but the hangers-on, the sympathizers, and curious. Keeping on the inside of the sidewalk, I continued over the hill.

Below I saw little clouds of bluish smoke rising on the bare dirt slopes; they were tear-gas bombs coming from a group of about fifty police officers in blue uniform at the base of the hill. And charging down upon them was a shouting mob of several hundred strikers, men and boys, some in old coats, some in shirtsleeves—down upon the uniforms. They hurled rocks. They picked up the tear-gas bombs and threw them back at the police. But the bombs came thicker and the shots faster. Four strikers fell in agony. Then the ranks broke and the men streamed up the hill with police in pursuit on foot and horse. Pickets piled barricades of planks and ladders at intervals along Harrison Street, blocking machines but not the "mounties," who drove into the crowds, scattering them into milling groups. Flames shot up on the dry grass slopes of the hill, and the smoke of the weeds mingled with the blue gas from the bombs. In a few moments the red cars of the fire department were racing into the scene. Pickets tried to cut the tough fire hose. Streams of water played on the rioters, and at times on the police and firemen. I saw one bystander tying up the bleeding wrist of another who had caught a stray buckshot.

Beside me one of the older men was too slow to avoid a horse. He was trampled under. "You son of a bitch!" cried a youth, hurling a railroad spike. The officer, nightstick drawn, pursued him around a corner. Quickly three strikers

dragged the injured man into a doorway. I joined them, glad of shelter from buckshot and bricks.

"What's it all about?" I asked.

He did not answer. He had laid his coat under the man's head and was blotting a gash in the temple with a dirty bandanna handkerchief.

I tried again. "What's the idea of charging the police? What can you expect when you start the rough stuff?"

He looked up this time, but with obvious contempt. He was a stevedore, all right, tall and blond, with the leathery, toil-worn countenance of one who had been at the work since boyhood. He might have been twenty-five or forty.

"Maybe he don't have to work!" sneered the second of the three.

I protested that I did.

"Well," said the first one, "suppose you'd been workin' for ten years for your company, or maybe twenty-five years like old 'Dad' here"—he mopped the victim's forehead again—"an' you got longer hours and harder work an' scummier treatment, an' every time one of you kicked you were told you could quit if you didn't like it. What would you do?"

"I might go out on strike," I answered, "but I wouldn't go around slugging strike-breakers and throwing bricks."

"You'd be plain yellow if you didn't! Why man, some of us has been with these companies longer than their owners. An', hell, what do we get for it? All the owners are out for now is to smash our unions so they can take care of us easy like in the future. What do they care if it costs a little now—it's