Russia from a Car Window

VI. The Soviets and the Future

By OSWALD GARRISON VILLARD

I. The Care of the Children

"T"he hope of Russia's future lies in its young girls," declared in Moscow one of the wisest writers on Russia, himself Russian-born and anti-Communist. There can be no question that the Soviets are seeking to build up a superb race. While there are still some wild children not yet picked up and put into asylums and homes, the bulk of the children we saw looked well-fed, healthy, and strong. When the weather permits, their little bodies are freely exposed to the sun, just as one sees so many laborers on the railways and roads stripped to the waist that one forgets to notice their beautiful red-brown color. Everything possible is being done for the oncoming generation—besides pumping them full of communist doctrine and teaching them to hate the capitalism they are not allowed to study or to understand.

In the beautiful health resorts in the Caucasus, notably at Kislovodsk, we saw so many really beautifully developed young men and women that some of us began to wonder if the Soviets were not deliberately seeking to restore the body and its care to the position it held among the ancient Greeks. Certainly there were many taking sun-baths and wandering over the hills in scant attire who looked in the pick of health and moved with the grace and ease of trained dancers and runners. At eight o'clock one night, as we were returning to Vladikavkaz from Tiflis after a day of scorching heat and clouds of dust, our autobus picked up three Russian boys, the youngest nine years old, the eldest fourteen. They had been hiking barefoot since four o'clock that morning, climbing first from Kazbek Station to the glacier on the great Kazbek Mountain which is eight hundred feet higher than Mont Blanc. There they walked several hundred yards on the ice without shoes. Then they turned back, went down to Kazbek Station, and started for Vladikavkaz, thirty-two and one-half miles away. When we picked them up we had passed dozens and dozens of other young people, the boys wearing trunks only, although the night was chilly, their packs on wagons, all climbing the seven thousand feet to Kazbek Station. Our three little hikers were fresh and in no wise overtired. They had just walked twelve kilometers without a rest and were planning to reach their homes at Vladikavkaz at three in the morning with nothing but mountain water and the huge chunks of black bread carried on their backs to sustain them. It is no wonder that high hopes are being built on children such as these. Maurice Hindus, too, believes in Russia's youth, and begged me to visit him and observe it in a city of 100,000 persons in the Ukraine. "I have traveled," he said, "in many countries, but I have seen no young people like these. They are free, they have liberty, but they know how to honor it."

No one can deny that there is in Russia today a remarkably effective schooling of the youth in civics and in the doctrine of service to a society which holds out no hope whatever of great material rewards; that schooling is probably even more rigid and self-disciplined than the youth training of the Italian Fascists. These Russian boys and girls in the Pioneers and Comsomols of the ages of ten to twenty-three are eagerly embracing a life which for a long time to come will mean great privation, at best an income of $150 a month with practically no worldly possessions. If this plan of life is definitely accepted by these young people, with understanding and appreciation of what it all means in the way of self-denial and self-sacrifice, together with the enthusiasm they are now displaying, it will be one of the most amazing examples of what religious and patriotic fervor can do which the world has yet witnessed. One hesitates to think what frightful, soul-destroying disillusionment will come to this generation if the Soviet experiment collapses.

II. Education Not Free

As for education, we have George Bernard Shaw's recent word for it that Russia is the only country which is properly educating its children—a dangerous generalization which may be true in spots. It is probably correct that the intention to give the most modern instruction is there. But there can be no ideal education where there is such a deliberate attempt to close the minds of the children to other things of life than those ordained by the Soviets. True modern education implies the right to browse unhampered in every field, to examine and judge every theory of morals, economics, and government—nothing more and nothing less. Of this kind of freedom one finds curiously little understanding in Russia. When we of the American-Russian Chamber of Commerce delegation reached Kharkov, we were heartily greeted by the members of the Ukrainian Literary Society. "We welcome you of the American press to a country which has the freest press in the world"—this was the opening remark of the head of the society. We accepted the challenge. It speedily appeared that his idea of liberty of the press included only those editors who favored the communist doctrine, precisely as Mussolini permits editorial freedom in Italy only to those who whole-heartedly support Fascism and suppress everything he does not care to have printed—in other words, who are willing to half-inform or to deceive the Italian people.

When I asked our Ukrainian friend if I would be permitted to establish a Ukrainian Nation in Kharkov, land of the "freest press in the world," and denounce the communist system there, he said: "You would be allowed to print one issue and no more." Asked if Ukrainian anti-communists would be allowed to publish their views he replied: "Oh, no, we could not allow a handful of dissenters who are not 5 per cent of the Ukrainian population to disturb the progress of the country." "Then," came the challenge of a young American auditor, "you would say that capitalist America would be justified in suppressing entirely the existing communist press in America since the American communists do not number anything like 5 per cent of the population?" The answer ran to the effect that if any more such embar-
raising questions were asked it would be necessary to terminate the conference! If this reveals an amazing mentality and hopeless ethical confusion, it is no more striking than the assertion of the official and unofficial defenders of Mussolini that Fascism is, in its final analysis, the "very essence of democracy!" But it is precisely this mentality which in large measure controls Russia today and insists that this "freedom" points the way for the liberation of the working classes the world over and that it will insure the triumphant success of the Bolshevik program.

III. HUMAN NATURE AND THE SOVIETS

Will it? It is easy to say that it will not if you are opposed on humanitarian and ethical grounds, or if you believe so completely in the present capitalistic system as to hold that no other economic organization of human life is possible. It is still easier to scoff at the whole communist program with a facile "You can't change human nature," and the assertion that therefore an acquisitive system of life is necessary to stimulate the human individual into advancing himself and his fellows spiritually and materially. To such doubters the self-denial of the Communists in restricting themselves to the barest living wage, and the refusal of highly educated engineers, familiar with pre-war capitalistic conditions, to accept any advance in salary is also unconvincing. The scoffers, in their cynicism, insist that these Communists either are secretly getting graft, or are possessed of a fanatical fervor which is sure to burn itself out before long. The latter is the commonest argument against the survival of the Soviets. No such passion for an impossible ideal, the critics assert, can long dominate men's minds or long induce them to live bare and colorless lives on the very edge of destitution and undernourishment. "You can't change human nature," they chant.

But the fact is that you can change human nature, or the habits and tribal customs with which the nature of man is usually confused. You can teach him to live for others and make tremendous sacrifices for others for the commonweal. Certainly no one can foretell into what extraordinary form the Soviets may not mold the Pioneers and Comsomols, and especially the young girls on whom so much hope is based. They have had these children from babyhood up to impress and mold and direct as they see fit. History tells us that great waves of asceticism and self-denial swept over Europe centuries ago. Here is another one in Russia.

Then one must not judge Russian human nature by our own. Conditions which we would not stand for a day Russians may endure for generations. Certainly they are now on the road to becoming the completely obedient tools of the dogmatists who rule them, who are also making of Russia a frightful prison-house for the millions who dissent and would gladly flee from their native soil to other lands. So far, therefore, as the psychological factors are concerned there is nothing improbable or impossible in the belief that the Russian people as a whole will yet definitely accept the Soviet scheme of things as an endurable way of life and will come to approve of it. If their economic conditions should improve rapidly they will, of course, react the more favorably and yield themselves to a life of abnegation as long as it may be necessary, in the hope that gradually their rulers will be able to employ the nation's surplus in enriching their lives and giving to each worker some of the good and costly things which in capitalist countries only the rich man may enjoy. When that time comes, the Soviet rulers say, they will gradually lift the ban on free speech and free thought; elsewhere I have already expressed my doubts about the eagerness of despots to lay down their tasks. At present, however, Stalin is in the saddle as never before; the opposition yields to him at every point; the omens are all favorable for him.

The only question seems to be not so much whether the Russian can be induced to accept communism, but whether he can endure the process of industrialization, and whether the rulers themselves will not in their haste over-extend themselves and topple over their entire structure. As Russia, because of its make-up and slight industrialization, was the most favorable place in the world to try the communist experiment, so the Russian was the best person to try it on. But the readiness with which some workers in America accept the intolerable working conditions which would cause ferment and grave unrest in other countries, and the ease with which the iron Fascist regime has been forced upon the Italians, are proof that one can readily impose hateful and extraordinarily trying conditions upon a people and prevent their rising to regain their liberty. I repeat, Russia must submit today—and tomorrow. If the Stalins of the next few years can keep their ship of state off the rocks of depreciation and bankruptcy the world will have seen the establishment of a tremendous new force to be reckoned with.

IV. THE FORCE OF A GREAT IDEAL

Finally, no one must underestimate the driving force of a great ideal and of the teaching of unity to the Russian masses. The concern of the Czarist regime was to keep them ignorant, uneducated, depressed, serfs in fact if not in name, incapable of joint action. Now they have in considerable degree become articulate. They have it driven in on them that they are not only the custodians of the new Russia, but that they have in their hands the future of the race itself. Well, it is a profoundly serious thing to infect a whole people with the belief that they have become the prophets of human redemption, to give them a new idea to cherish and, if need be, die for. That belief may insure Soviet success. It is today a most stimulating and reviving force; it unquestionably in part explains the tremendous thirst for adult education, and it gives life and point to the present otherwise dreary and pinched existence of the masses. They know whither they are headed, however hard the road.

Your Russian is an amazing realist. I am astonished every now and then to meet émigrés who can face the facts, who realize the guilt that was theirs, who admit that their class looted Russia for its own selfish aims. As I write, I see the face of a noblewoman, long an attendant of a Czarina, owner once of one of the finest houses on the Neva. After telling me of her several arrests and long imprisonment for no cause save that she had a title, and her loss of every ruble she possessed, she calmly said: "Well, we who ruled Russia earned just what has come to us, if only because of those Jewish pogroms that the Czar permitted to take place, although some of us protested—in vain." She, too, could feel that Russia now had an objective besides the further enriching of the rich and privileged.

Here I must record a statement made to me by a man whom Louis Fischer, The Nation's able Moscow correspondent, introduced to me as "the ablest man in Russia."
I am constantly traveling to Berlin, London, Brussels, and Paris. I meet on the trains and on my arrival in those cities Russians who have just left their country. They are all wild with enthusiasm at escaping for a time from what they call their Russian prison—you must understand that the men are government officials or engineers, or business men allowed to go abroad because their missions are official or unofficial. "Oh, how wonderful it is here," they say, "how wonderful to get back to the old gay life!" They revel in the dance halls, the cafes on the sidewalk, the well-dressed crowds, and all the charms of capitalist society. But when I come back after four or five weeks and call upon these same people they do not look so happy, but seem rather depressed. I say to them: "What is the matter; isn't it all just as nice as it was when you first arrived and you were so happy to have escaped from your Russian prison?" "No," they reply, "we are not as happy." "Why, what's the matter?" "Well, it's all so bourgeois." "But you are bourgeois yourself?" "Yes, but look at the faces of the people around us in this restaurant. They are all like that, so sordid and materialistic. We shall be glad to get back to Russia." "To get back to your prison?" "Yes; well, you see it is bad enough there, but after all they have got a plan, a program, an ideal, even if you don't like it. At least in Russia we are working for something. Here they are just out to make money and have a good time; here materialism rules."

There you have some of the strength of the Soviet movement.

V. WHERE THE LEADERS HAVE BLUNDERED

As to the possibility of Russia becoming democratic, there is certainly in the Soviet form of government no natural obstacle to its becoming a popular one just as it has no relationship to communism. I once heard Secretary Lansing say to the American correspondents at his reception room in the Hotel Crillon in Paris during the Peace Conference that he saw no reason why the Soviet form of political organization might not be as democratic as our own, and no one will accuse Mr. Lansing of having been unduly favorable to the Bolshevists. It could certainly be made workable in a capitalist society. But the Russian leaders have made the grave mistake of identifying their new form of government with a bloody despotism, precisely as communism has, partly through facts and partly through hostile propaganda, become identified with violence. The average American, and especially those legislators who have done that un-American thing of legislating against a state of mind and have made membership in the American Communist Party a crime, have come wrongly to believe that communism necessarily connotes bloodshed, the violent seizure of private property, and governmental terrorism of the worst kind. I suppose that such violent convulsions as that which took place in Russia and the French Revolution must inevitably be bloody when they occur. The more the pity that the Soviet rulers of today feel that there is no other way of maintaining their power except through violence, terrorism, and murder. They cannot, I believe, have the sympathy of liberals the world over as long as they pursue this policy. They cannot hope for friendly cooperation from those who wish to set the workingman free in other countries and give him every one of the benefits that he has under the Soviet regime as long as they rule as they do.

It is no answer to say that these Soviet leaders know their problem and their people; that their great objective of human happiness warrants their methods, that the end justifies the means; that, should the Soviets be thrown out, Russia would disintegrate into the most appalling anarchy, and that they resort to no more bloodshed than is absolutely necessary. This has been the language of despots from time immemorial, and when they have been overthrown nations and peoples have not disintegrated, but have gone on to better things. It is a fact that the finest ideals may be ruined by a wrong approach or by the use of wicked measures to attain them. For myself I can see no compromise on this question, no argument which shatters the intensity of my belief that those who take the sword shall perish by the sword.

No one who has witnessed this Russian experiment and sensed its significance can remain unmoved by the human elements involved and by its dramatic quality. The deeper, therefore, the regret that the men who are doing these titanic things are savagely crushing their critics or opponents, are shooting, imprisoning, and exiling precisely as did the Caesar. The whole world yearns for a state which shall really be controlled by the masses and not by handfuls of men temporarily in control of powers no group of mortals should have. Yet the Bolshevists, with all their desire for peace, justice, liberty, and equality for a nation of workers, offer side by side with tremendous benefits, the methods of a Caesar, a Cromwell, a Franz Joseph, a Nicholas, and a Mussolini.

[This is the last of a series of six articles. They will shortly be reprinted in pamphlet form. Another important article on Russia by Louis Fischer, Moscow correspondent of The Nation, will appear in an early issue.—EDITOR THE NATION.]

Secretary Wilbur at Boulder Dam

By RUTH FINNEY

WHEN Secretary of the Interior Wilbur makes final disposition of the power at Boulder Dam the attitude of the Hoover Administration toward the future of the country's power resources will be known. In the present Boulder Dam controversy the issue between public and private development is drawn as clearly as it could be drawn. Until hearings held recently before Secretary Wilbur at which his tentative plan for disposing of the power was discussed this had not been generally apparent. His allocation, at first glance, seemed to give States and municipalities such generous treatment as to make complaint of his concessions to power companies seem capacious; but at these hearings the matter appeared in a new light. City after city registered its protest against the Secretary's proposal to give the Southern California Edison Company one-fourth of all the power to be generated at the great dam which is to be built by the federal government. In two days of discussion one man, and only one, spoke in favor of the Wilbur plan. He was W. C. Mullendore, attorney for the Southern California Edison Company, the great concern that distributes power throughout this part of California.

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