

The Thirties

1930 -1940

IN GREAT BRITAIN

By Malcolm Muggeridge

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Mr. High-Mind

The U.S.S.R. represented a difficulty. Naturally, a Labour Government was inclined to favour closer relations with the Soviet Government and the granting of trading credits; on the other hand, the memory of the Zinovieff Letter and its disastrous electoral consequences was still fresh, and the *Daily Worker*, which had just begun publication, contained regular fulminations against ‘the Social-Fascists and King’s toadies of the Labour Government,’ who, ‘not content with keeping Indian workers rotting in Meerut Prison, are openly shooting down unarmed Negro workers in Nigeria,’ and repeatedly expressed its determination to expose ‘the reactionary schemes of the trade union bureaucracy and the Labourites and pseudo-lefts.’ The Foreign Secretary was bombarded with questions about Anglo-Soviet relations in the House of Commons, and the cautious statements which these questions elicited were impatiently received by many Government supporters.

Admiration for the Soviet régime had greatly increased since the introduction of the Five-Year Plan in 1929, though more among Liberals and the professional classes than among trade unionists, who from the beginning showed themselves to be less easily deluded by Soviet propaganda than university professors, writers and clergymen. Professor Julian Huxley, for instance, had no difficulty in believing that while we were in Russia a German town-planning expert was travelling over the huge Siberian spaces in a special train with a staff of assistants, where

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cities are to arise, stopping for a few days, picking out the best site, laying down the broad outlines of the future city, and passing on, leaving the details to be filled in by architects and engineers who remain,’ or that ‘Stalin himself sometimes comes down to the Moscow goods sidings to help’;¹³ whereas the late Herbert Smith, President of the Miners’ Federation, and Sir Walter Citrine, both of whom visited the U.S.S.R., showed an irritating disinclination to accept such absurdities on trust, and insisted on investigating actual conditions of life.

The cost of a tour in the U.S.S.R., though moderate, was beyond the means of most manual workers, so that those who availed themselves of the exceedingly competent Intourist organisation were predominantly income-tax payers. Their delight in all they saw and were told, and the expression they gave to their delight, constitute unquestionably one of the wonders of the age. There were earnest advocates of the humane killing of cattle who looked up at the massive headquarters of the OGPU with tears of gratitude in their eyes, earnest advocates of proportional representation who eagerly assented when the necessity for a Dictatorship of the Proletariat was explained to them, earnest clergymen who walked reverently through anti-God museums and reverently turned over the pages of atheistic literature, earnest pacifists who watched delightedly tanks rattle across the Red Square and bombing planes darken the sky, earnest town-planning specialists who stood outside over crowded, ramshackle tenements and muttered: ‘If only we had something like this in England!’ The almost unbelievable credulity of these mostly university-educated tourists astonished even Soviet officials used to handling foreign visitors, and, expressed in large numbers of books and articles in newspapers and periodicals,

especially in the *Moscow Daily News*, an English newspaper published in Moscow, should provide some future Gibbon with material after his heart.

The climax came, perhaps, with the visit to the U.S.S.R. of Mr. Bernard Shaw, Lady Astor and Lord Lothian, which pro-

¹³. *A Scientist Among the Soviets*.

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vided, as Mr. Eugene Lyons has put it, 'a fortnight of clowning.'¹⁴ In honour of Mr. Shaw's seventy-fifth birthday, which took place while he was in Moscow, a huge meeting was held, fittingly, in the old Nobles' Club, in the room where so many political prisoners have been tried and convicted. There was at the time a serious food-shortage, and even this privileged audience included some who were on short rations. Mr. Shaw explained in his speech how, before he started off on his trip, he had been warned to provide himself with supplies of tinned food, how he had thrown these emergency supplies out of the train on his way through Poland because he knew that talk of a food shortage in the U.S.S.R. was all nonsense, and how he had never been so overstuffed in his life as since he crossed the Soviet frontier. It was the only thing the Russians were unable to forgive him—that he should have thrown away food instead of bringing it with him to Moscow.

Later, at a Foreign Office reception, according to Mr. Lyons, Lady Astor astonished everyone by suddenly prostrating herself before Litvinov, the Commissar for Foreign Affairs. She had received a telegram from a Russian Professor in the United States asking her to intercede for his family, who had been detained in the U.S.S.R. Litvinov, much embarrassed by Lady Astor's impulsive gesture, read the telegram and turned irritably away, remarking that the matter was not within his jurisdiction. Undeterred by this rebuff Lady Astor appealed to other im-

¹⁴ *In Assignment in Utopia*:

'Defly Shaw skimmed the surface, careful not to break through the lacquer of appearances. If Lady Astor asked too many questions he neatly slapped her wrist. He judged food conditions by the Metropole menu, collectivization by the model farm, the OGPU by the model colony at Bolshovo, socialism by the twittering of attendant sycophants. His performance was not amusing to Russians. It was macabre. The lengthening obscenity of ignorant or indifferent tourists disporting themselves cheerily on the aching body of Russia, seemed summed-up in this cavorting old man, in his blanket endorsement of what he would not understand. I was so taken up with demonstrating how youthful and agile he was that he had no attention to spare for the revolution in practice.'

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portant Soviet officials when the opportunity occurred, but got no more satisfaction out of them than she had out of Litvinov.

Despite such episodes the Soviet régime continued to be held in ever greater esteem by writers like Shaw and André Gide'- and Romain Rolland; clergymen like the Reverend Hewlett Johnson, journalists like Walter Duranty and Maurice Hindus, economists like G. D. H. Cole and the Webbs, scientists like Professor Julian Huxley. How could all these, so learned and so righteous, be wrong? Was the *Manchester Guardian* given to falsehood, or Fabians to hasty conclusions? Highbrow film societies were enthralled by Russian films like *Mother* and *The End of St. Petersburg*, and cheered to the skies the heroes of the Revolution, as, later, they cheered the news that these same heroes had

mostly been shot as spies and traitors. Week after week Soviet boats sailed from London for Leningrad packed with distinguished passengers, all excited, readers of *Humanity Uprooted* and *Red Bread*, appreciative of the crew's singing of revolutionary songs and of the captain's interesting speech; of the Lenin's Corner, and of the unanimous decision taken at a meeting presided over by someone from the London School of Economics that it would be in bad taste to offer money to the stewards, but perhaps some books for the ship's library might be permissible; in each male heart a vision, never to be realised, of a *comsomolka* with a red kerchief over jet black hair, with dark glistening eyes and flushed cheeks, dancing a revolutionary dance; in each female heart heaven knows what visions.

Few there must be among Left sympathisers whose circumstances enable them to satisfy the minimum requirements laid down by Virginia Woolf (a room of one's own and four hundred a year) for an adequate life, who did not go on this pilgrimage, eagerly looking at all they were shown and listening to all they

¹⁵ A number of these writers soured on the régime as time went on; for instance, Gide, whose *Retour de l'U.S.S.R.*, published in 1936 expressed his disillusionment after a visit to the U.S.S.R., and created some stir. Not even Stalin, however, could shake the fidelity of Romain Rolland and the Webbs.

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were told, conducting furtive money-changing transactions at unofficial rates, sending postcards to awed relatives, buying with valuta perhaps a Russian embroidered blouse or shirt for fancy-dress wear. In the U.S.S.R., they created some wonder, much indignation, too; at home, they lectured, wrote, broadcast, cultivated beards which in some cases were trimmed like Lenin's.

The Government, despite certain misgivings, resumed full diplomatic relations with the U.S.S.R. and proceeded to negotiate an Anglo-Soviet trade agreement. In 1924 the naive proposal had been put forward and seriously considered of sending to Moscow, not a professional diplomat, but someone like Sir James O'Grady, the transport workers' leader. This proposal, however, was icily received in Moscow. 'Send us a gentleman,' a Foreign Office official said to an English journalist there, 'he'll understand us.' In due course they were sent Sir Esmond Ovey, and Sir James O'Grady went to Tasmania.

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