

RUSSIA—THE LAND OF CONTRASTS

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WHEN, last year, in the lovely twilight of a Finnish late summer evening, my husband and I went to the station in Helsingfors to take the train for Leningrad, it was with the very definite feeling that we had embarked on an adventure certain to prove exciting and likely to involve some danger. It was not with such feelings that we had left Canada. Then the trip into Russia, which was to enable us to see the three large cities of that country—Leningrad, Moscow and Kiev—had seemed an interesting aftermath to attendance at the first post-war gathering of the Y. M. C. A.'s of the world held at Helsingfors. (There was no Czar to forbid the meeting, as there had been in 1913). But as we drew nearer to Russia, we found that hatred and dread of the Government of that country increased. Stories of the probable discomforts and dangers multiplied and intensified. Once in Finland, however, we were too near Russia to be turned from our purpose of seeing for ourselves as much as might be of the truth of the many conflicting stories we had both heard and read.

Now that we have been to Russia and have come safely home, it seems to us that there are not many general statements to be made about that country which can be described as definitely true. Though it may seem a contradiction, one of those statements is that conflicting stories may both be entirely accurate—such is the kaleidoscopic rapidity with which Russia is changing. And a second is that Russia is above everything else a land of great contrasts—contrasts between wealth and poverty, and all that flows from them, of pre-war days; contrasts between the old and the new; contrasts between what the new rulers sought to achieve and that with which they have had to be content. The commencement of understanding the Russia of to-day is the realization of that fact.

But let me go back to that Sunday evening in mid-August of last year when with some trepidation we entered the train which was to take us into Russia. We then began our knowledge of the first contrast—in many ways the most surprising one—which meets the traveller. This is the contrast between what he has been told is going to happen to him and the conditions he discovers once

he has crossed the Russian frontier. We found ourselves in a compartment car, very like the same type of car in Canada, except that the compartments were larger and much more ornate. We were in company with quite an international group of travellers. The train looked, and proved to be, spotlessly clean. So were all the trains in which we made our four railway journeys in Russia. Each of the three nights spent in cars of this kind we slept between freshly laundered linen sheets, and were served by porters most anxious to make us comfortable. The word "class" having been banished from Russia, cars are no longer described as in other countries, but the thing itself is still there. First-class cars are called now "soft-seat carriages", while third-class cars are termed "hard-seat carriages." In each one may buy either "sitting" or "lying" places, with the usual wide difference in price. But, even with the luxury of the compartment, travel in Russia costs somewhat less than in Canada with a lower berth.

The exciting moment of that journey—in anticipation—was the encounter with the Passport and Customs officials, which came about ten o'clock the next morning. All of us, from whatever country we came, had been warned of the difficulties of these examinations. As a matter of fact, for all save one of the 27 passengers going into Russia on that train, the Passport examination consisted in giving up Passports for two hours and then receiving them back without enquiry or comment of any kind. The one exception was a young Korean, whose papers were not in good order, and who had to return to Helsingfors. Subsequently he overtook us in Leningrad. The Customs examination, in spite of all the tales of minute scrutiny of papers and confiscation of any articles of clothing in excess of the permitted list issued by the Government, was much less exacting than I have often had when passing into or out of the United States. Practically the same thing may be said of the examinations when we came to leave Russia.

I have said that we found the trains clean. That statement applies even to the hard-seat carriages in which we finally made our way to the Polish border, and out of which we had been warned to keep if we valued our personal comfort and cleanliness. That, if one has the time, is the way to travel in Russia, for then one sees the people and has opportunity to talk with them. With a most meagre common equipment in English, French and German, I yet learned a great deal about Russia, and especially about the Ukraine, from three young women school-teachers and a young man school-inspector who were going back to reopen their schools

in Berditchev, the New Jerusalem of the Ukraine. And they learned at least one thing about Canada, important for all Russians to know. "What", they asked of me, "do you think of the proletarian revolution in the United States and Canada?" With definiteness I told them that there was no such thing.

Like the trains, the hotels are clean and comfortable. They are shabby, no fresh paper, paint or upholstery having found a way into them since before the war. The one exception was our hotel in Kiev, actually at the moment in the hands of workmen undergoing a restoration process. One gets in the Russian hotels much the same service as in any other European hotels, and one pays about the same tips for it. Rooms, even rooms with baths, may be had for lower rates than in the corresponding hotels in Canada. In the dining-rooms of these, as well as in the café-restaurants, meals are served at prices fixed by the Government which operates them all. The price of a good three or four course dinner in the first hotels is two roubles, a rouble being slightly more than 52 cents. This dinner is served from noon until seven or eight in the evening, so that, if one observes the Russian hours, the cost of meals is not great. If, however, the traveller wishes to vary from these hours, he will find eating a rather costly business. It cost us as much to get a glass of tea and a few macaroons in the evening as to get dinner within the regular hours.

Even if the experienced traveller somewhat discounted the stories of discomforts and dangers, of the lack of cleanliness and even of ordinary hygienic precautions, he yet might very well expect to find the various public services in a chaotic condition. If he did, he would find his experience a high contrast to his expectation. To the great amusement of our friends in Europe, we went into Russia with a very definite schedule of movements. We were able to adhere to it in every particular. Trains, in our experience, left and arrived on time. The services the traveller required were all prompt and efficient. Moreover, this seemed to be the general condition. Street cars were clean, and moved along briskly. In Moscow and Kiev this service was amplified by a very modern motor bus service. Streets were swept all day long, and washed at intervals. In Moscow watering carts plied in the streets, and woe be to the pedestrian who did not keep out of their way. The streets were well lighted, and the telephone service appeared good. In Moscow there were the beginnings of a cheap taxicab service. A Government travel office promptly refunded an overcharge made on tickets bought in Finland. Banks and money-changing offices gave the full rate of exchange. We had one occasion to put the

postal service to a test that in Canada we should think a severe one, and it proved entirely satisfactory.

In fact, we found all the incidents of travel very much the same in Russia as they were in any other country in which we travelled last summer, including our own, always excepting the language difficulty. The traveller in Russia to-day should have some knowledge of German. Throughout the entire two weeks we were in the country, we had not a single unpleasant incident. Most important of all, perhaps, we had not at any time the feeling that we were being watched over or prevented from seeing anything we wished to see. Before we went in, we had memorized the maps of the cities, so that we would always know whether we were in fact being taken where we wished to go. Not once did we find any reason to suspect any attempt to interfere with us, and that though we made a practice of walking about the cities both day and night. We discussed this question with several other travellers, and learned how they had all found, generally to their own surprise, that they appeared to be quite free to go where they liked and do what they liked.

Our guide in Moscow summed up for us the limits of liberty in Russia the first day we were out with him. "Within the limits of the law", he said, "you may do what you like in Russia. You may also say what you like, except one thing, and that one thing is criticism of the Government or any member of it." A little thought on that last clause shows plainly that, whatever good a Canadian may see in Russia or even in the efforts of the Soviet Government, it is no place for those bred in the British traditions of free speech and political liberty.

Entering Russia, as we did, from Finland, the visitor comes first to Leningrad, which is the saddest city I have ever seen. It is not only that the war condition still remains physically present—that signs of war destruction and mob violence are seen on every hand, and that the work of cleaning and painting and generally restoring has only begun. All these things but made a background for the people, who looked as no other people I have ever seen. Shabbily dressed, the men for the most part in coarse cotton Russian blouses, the women in clothing which had been remade again and again, they seemed to be almost all on the one level of intelligence and economic prosperity. And that level was to our eyes a low one. In truth, the people we saw in those three days in Leningrad looked very much as a crowd of casual labourers not of Anglo-Saxon stock would look on our Canadian streets. Where the *intelligentsia*, who are said to live now in large numbers in Leningrad, were, we

do not know. When occasionally we saw two or three of them, they stood out in the crowd as an individual of extra height does among us. It seemed to us then, and still seems to us, that what we were seeing in Leningrad was the result of the effort of the Bolsheviki to bring all the population to one dead level. They did not look cowed, those people, nor specially unhappy, though we heard no one laugh. They seemed more like people who had had a terrific shock, and were just beginning to convalesce.

When we got to Moscow, we found ourselves in a strangely contrasting atmosphere. This was no doubt partially due to the fact that the restoration process was practically completed. But again it was chiefly the people who impressed us. Certainly we saw many of just the same kind of people we had seen in Leningrad, but here they were only an element in the population, and there were many elements and as many levels. Here, certainly, were the coarse Russian blouses we had seen, and poorly dressed women, and innumerable beggars, and the vagrant children of whom one had read so much. But here also were deftly tailored blouses of fine linen, and even of silk, and men well dressed after the European fashion. Here, also, were smartly dressed women, wearing pretty shoes and hats, which had been almost absent in Leningrad. It is true there were no really luxuriously attired people, as there are in other European cities; but just as certainly there were many levels of people on the Moscow streets, whether one looked at the evidences of economic condition or at those of intellectual development. One was aware also of an energy—an aliveness. Everyone seemed to be intent upon the business in hand, and to be glad to be about it, though here, as in Leningrad, we heard no one laugh. And it seems to us still, as it seemed then, that in Moscow we were seeing the complete breakdown of that levelling process adopted in the early days of the Revolution. Certainly new levels have emerged. The Soviet people like to tell the visitor that they are new levels of *ability*. As to that we do not know, but the levels are there, human nature having been too strong for even the most devoted of Marxists. Conditions in Kiev were even more of a contrast; for, though war damage was still plainly to be seen, the general degree of prosperity was greater, and here at last we heard people laughing happily together.

No contrast is more vivid in the memory of the visitor than that between the living conditions of all persons in the great cities of Russia, and the living conditions of those same people, be they aristocrats, or casual labourers, before the Revolution. The house rationing system, which the Bolsheviki originated when they

came to power, and which remains to-day, is the single most complete instance of Communism we were able to find. Indeed, I might go so far as to say that it is the single instance of unmodified Communism which came to our notice.

By the very simple process of dividing the number of persons living in any city into the number of square feet of floor space of all available living quarters, the amount of space to which each person is entitled, if all are to be treated alike, is found. In Moscow this space amounts to something in the neighborhood of 120 square feet, or a room ten by twelve. In such a room, or in one double that for two persons, which was the example we actually saw, all the operations of the business of living must be carried on—eating, sleeping, washing, dressing, storing food and clothing, and receiving one's friends. For such space one pays, not according to location, but according to income.

All the small continuous tragedies which flow from such a way of living—the lack of privacy, to begin with—are much intensified by another act of the Bolsheviki which accompanied this rationing of living quarters. Deliberately they went into different quarters of the city and brought to live in one house or apartment people of widely varying standards of—well, let us say ordinary cleanliness and the small courtesies of life. This makes life for many people, used in former days to the gentler things, almost intolerable. It also makes it impossible for many people to use the kitchen, which is always set aside for common service, and so cooking must be added to the other operations carried on in that one room. Small wonder that divorces grow more numerous! "We can never get a rest from each other," was the way one Russian woman put it to me.

There is in this condition a double contrast. For the people who were among the upper economic grades of society in pre-war Russia, living quarters were most spacious and this whether they were apartments or houses. For them the present system represents a terrible grinding tragedy which has to be seen to be realized. But no one of any intelligence can look at present conditions in Moscow, even granted that its population has increased perhaps fifteen per cent, without wondering—if this small room is now the fair average—in what condition did the people of the lower economic grades live before. Just here one comes on one of the almost unbelievable extremes of the conditions in old Russia, and so to one of the mainsprings of the Revolution.

Perhaps the greatest contrast between what was attempted in the first days of the Revolution and what the hard facts of

human nature have made necessary is seen in the condition which surrounds the factory workers, most of all in the wage condition. If in the beginning, as appears to be the case, the Communist maxim, "From everyone according to his ability, to everyone according to his need," was really put into operation, there is little trace of it left. One fact told to us by a member of the general executive committee of the Trade Union organization makes that clear. In the Moscow district sixty per cent. of all factory workers are now on the piece work system, and nothing more directly opposed to the principles of Communism than this wage system can be imagined. Moreover, wages vary widely, and have no relation to the need of the worker. In the Moscow district wages run from 45 roubles a month for a beginner, up to 225 roubles a month, which is the top trade union wage, or was last August. The average wage of these workers is 130 roubles per month. Much higher rewards, up to 300 roubles a month, are paid to technical directors, engineering and other technical skill being at a premium in Russia just now.

The first type of organization which permitted men to elect their superintendents, and to manage the factory, has also passed away. Directors are now chosen by the Government trust, and there is a trust for each kind of factory. Men are now dismissed if their work is unsatisfactory, and the same trade union representatives spoke of "severe discipline" in the factories. The Government being one of workers managing things in the interest of the workers, it did surprise us to find in the factory we visited, a great textile works, employing about 8,000 hands, a grievance committee with an employee of the factory drawing the top wage and devoting his time to its work. We visited this chairman, and found him in type and attitude very like the chairman of similar grievance committees in those countries which the Russians scornfully describe as *bourgeois*.

With this chairman we discussed the method by which wages are settled. Each October there is a conference between the men and the representatives of the trust, when wages and conditions are determined. This must be done in considerable detail, we judged from the printed pamphlet he showed us containing the contract. We then sought to find out something of the plan upon which wages are arranged. Suppose, we asked, it is costing more to live in Moscow when October comes, will the wages go up? They will. Suppose, though, that it costs less to live, would the wages go down. They would not. But suppose the cost of living went down, and there were no profits made by that

factory, would the wages not go down then? Wages, would never go down; other factories in the trust would make the profits. But suppose, we tried again, that none of the five factories in this trust make a profit, what then? The chief of the grievance committee shrugged his shoulders. "That is the Government's concern, not ours", was his reply.

Of course there remain many social conditions which are completely new since the Revolution. Old age pensions and unemployment insurance are among them; also two weeks' holidays with pay, and even payment for time lost by conditions over which the workers have no control, as, for instance, floods. There are also elaborate provisions for the women employees, particularly for the married woman who works, and there are many more of these in proportion in Russia than on this continent. These provisions include two months' holiday with full pay before the birth of a child, and another two months under the same conditions afterwards. For eight months after the child comes, the mother will be paid nine roubles a month extra in order that she may buy extra milk. There is the children's house attached to the factory where she may take her young children, and a kindergarten for the older ones. In these institutions her children will have expert care and instruction at the cost of the factory.

No contrast appeals more to the visitor to Russia than that which is seen in the efforts now being made to educate the Russian people, as against the lack of provision, to put it kindly, for education in the days of the Tsars. One is sensible of an eagerness for knowledge pervading the people long before one turns to the business of making definite enquiries. Visit the Athletic Club of the union of the employees (the office workers) and, though it is summer and the emphasis is on games and music, you will yet hear of the radio lectures and instructive moving-picture programmes carried out almost every evening. Listen to the story of the winter clubs of the various unions; it will be largely a story of the various circles and the subjects they are studying. Discuss the elective system, and you will find at its base the Workers' Councils. Enquire about these, and you will find them one immense training school in public service, a school in which everyone is made to study, or perhaps is eager to study, the subject to which he has decided to devote himself. Visit the factories, and you will hear much talk of the Rabfacs, and of the plans for those employed in the factories who show themselves able to qualify for entrance to the institute or university which will make out of them the experts Russia needs so badly. And all the while, as you go about the streets,

you are conscious of the amazing number of book stores and of the people in them buying books, most of them paper covered and cheaply produced. That they all come from the Government printing press, or are imported by the Government, seemingly affects not at all their enthusiastic reception. The practical western mind cannot, however, but reflect upon the tremendous power to mould the desires of the people this scheme gives to the Government.

When in 1920 the Soviet rulers took a census of the country, there were listed 117,000,000. Analysis of that census revealed the fact that of that number 54,000,000 persons above the age of eight years could neither read nor write. As soon as possible the work of what is picturesquely called "liquidating the illiteracy" was commenced. The Commissariat of Education was charged by the All Russian Executive Committee with the task of removing the illiteracy of all adults between the ages of 18 and 35 before the republic should attain its tenth birthday. This one task alone meant teaching some 17,000,000 people to read and write. "A considerable part of the work", says a pamphlet issued by the Department of Education last year, "that is, the abolition of illiteracy among the members of the trades unions and Red soldiers, has been summarily achieved. However, the most difficult part, the abolition of illiteracy among the rural populations, still remains to be carried out." We met no one in Russia who told us he thought the task could be accomplished before that tenth birthday which comes next November. In the three years this work has been under way, some 4,600,000 people have, it is said, been taught to read and write. It is a fact the significance of which in the future of Russia cannot be easily overestimated, that the primers with which these millions of men and women are being taught to read are also primers in Communism.

In a visit to the Department of Education—"Narcom" is its familiar name—where we talked with the chief of the inspectoral section, one of his assistants, and a woman of the States Scholastic Council, we learned of the new system being followed in the ordinary schools. Perhaps we should really say the system they are attempting to follow. Schools open with the kindergarten which takes children at about three years of age. This is evidently a much prized advance, for the chief inspector outlined it in detail and with enthusiasm. It was his answer to our first question which won our confidence and made us so ready to accept what else he might say. How many children were in those kindergartens, we asked. The glow of enthusiasm faded. We realized that it was an unkind

question, but it was answered without hesitation. "Generally throughout the union about 2%; in Moscow 8%."

Passing on to the primary schools, as we would call them—the Unified Labour School is the Russian's phrase—we learned that they were divided very much as with us. The first section takes the children from 8 to 12 years of age, and the second from 12 to 17 years, thus making a nine-year plan. Ultimately the Russians hope to have all these years devoted to general education. At present this second section is divided again into two sections of three and two years, the last two years being devoted to vocational training.

Nowhere in these schools are examinations allowed for either entrance or examination test. No punishments of any kind are permitted, self-government being introduced in all the schools, and the completeness of this increasing as the age advances. For this purpose the two young people's organizations, the "Young Pioneers" and the "Octobrists", are closely linked with the schools. The pupils do not, however, as we had heard, choose their own teachers. These are appointed by what seem to be in effect local branches of the central Department. More radical still is the academic programme. All text-books for the children are swept away, and no subjects as such are taught. Here one may quote again from the pamphlet issued with the blessing of M. Lunacharsky, People's Commissar of Education: "All schools of the R. S. F. S. R. adapt their activity to the programmes worked out by the State Council of Education. The programme is based chiefly upon the study of human labour. The teaching is planned according to a complex system which, in distinction from the old system of teaching disconnected branches of science, aims at grouping all the separate subjects such as the mother tongue, mathematics, natural science, drawing, etc., round a set of definite ideas which form the core of the educational plan."

This programme has not yet been applied to all the children in Russia. Present plans call for having all the children up to the age of 12 years in schools of this kind by the year 1933. These schools will have, it is planned, a school year of 8 to 9 months of six days to the week. The school day begins at four hours and rises to six. At this point we enquired how many children were actually in school now. In the country, 60% we were told; in the large cities, almost 100%. At this point the inspector asked that we should keep in mind pre-revolutionary conditions. There were no kindergartens then, and no playgrounds, and only 20% of the children finished the first grade.

We had more questions to ask. Was it true that children were being taken from their homes and put into school? Only when home conditions were very bad, we were told. Was it true, then, that children were being educated away from their parents? I give the answer of the chief inspector set down at the moment he said it: "The school educates the children in conditions of the moment; but, if there is a conflict between parents and children, certainly the school is on the side of the child. The school tries to work not only with the children but with the parents. If the parents need it, they are re-educated." Do you teach Communism? was our next query. Again I quote the inspector: "I have told you that we teach no subjects as such; so we do not teach Communism, nor is the child who is religious taught that he must be irreligious. But it is only honest to say that the background of all our teaching is materialism, or Communism."

In the higher schools all the emphasis is being laid on the technical or vocational subjects. It is not, so the woman member of the State Council told us, that they do not value what in *bourgeois* countries is called cultural education, but that the need for trained people in all the services is so great that all possible effort must be put into producing people who can carry on the industrial, agricultural, commercial and educational processes of the country. When we visited the old University of Kiev, we found a new name over the door. "The Institute of People's Education" was that new name, and it is indicative of the chief movement in the Russian world of education to-day.

In order to quicken this process of securing trained people, many plans are being tried to make higher education available for such adults as do not belong to the illiterate group. The so-called Rabfacs, schools attached to factories, and the Workers' Faculties, adult high schools both day and night, are the main features of this branch of education. But it seemed to us that almost every scheme of adult education of which we had ever heard was being given a trial here.

No word has been said as yet on two subjects in which, to judge by the enquiries made of us, all the world is interested—divorce and the state of the Church. As to the first of these, it is true that both marriage and divorce have become very simple processes in Russia. Both, if there are no children, are simply matters of going before the right official and making certain declarations which are registered. Under the new law no divorce is refused, even if only one of the parties desires it. If, however, there are children of the marriage, certain somewhat onerous conditions must be

complied with. Before the divorce will be given at all, one of the parents must arrange to take care of the children. In Russia this is usually the mother. Then the other parent, usually the father, must pay not less than one-third of his income if there is one child, and not more than half if there is more than one, towards the support of the children until they are 18 years of age. Since Russia is a country of permits, the Government is able to see to it that the parent does not evade his payments. The same arrangements will be made upon the dissolution of what we call a common-law marriage, if the wife can prove the paternity of the children.

The official attitude of the Soviet Government last summer with regard to religion was that people were free to worship or not to worship just as they chose. There is a high official of the Government charged with the duty of seeing that this freedom is maintained. Many of the churches were open, and to all appearance people were going freely to them. We stood in the Red Square, not a stone's throw from the Lenin Mausoleum, one Saturday evening, and watched the people coming and going from the great St Basil's Cathedral. There were old folk and young folk, men and women, and even men in the uniform of the Red army. The next morning we tried to attend service in St. Basil's, but could not get inside for the crowd. The church, in which we heard a very beautiful choral service, was crowded all the time we were there with people coming and going. Not two hundred feet from the wall which carries the famous sign "Religion—the Opiate of the People" the faithful stand all day waiting their turn to get into the famous old shrine of the Iberian Virgin. All over the city of Moscow, churches are being restored. Those which the Government has declared national museums, are being repaired by the Government; those which still belong to the congregations are being repaired by their own people. It seemed quite evident that the Government had given up the old frontal attack on religion. There are, however, evidences of another, a much more subtle, line of attack being followed in the conflict between Communism and Christianity. These evidences may be seen in the primers with which the millions of illiterates are being taught to read; in that Communism which is woven into all education; in the hundreds of books being turned out at the behest of the Government; and, most of all, in those hundreds of men, women and children, who wait patiently in the Red Square each evening for the hour when they may enter the Lenin Mausoleum and gaze reverently on the face of the man who, though he has been dead three years, still lies there in bodily presence—the real ruler of Russia to-day, the modern prophet of Communism.