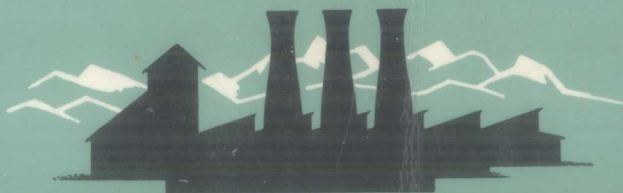


BEHIND THE URALS

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An American Worker in Russia's City of Steel



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JOHN SCOTT

BEHIND THE URALS

An American Worker in
Russia's City of Steel

BY
JOHN SCOTT



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Foreword

John Scott, whose father was Scott Nearing, a prominent progressive socialist and briefly a Communist, left the University of Wisconsin in 1931 after two years of study. Appalled by the depression in the United States and attracted by what he had heard concerning the effort to create a "new society" in the Soviet Union, he obtained training as a welder in a General Electric plant then went to the Soviet Union to join the great crusade. Assigned ultimately to construction of the new "Soviet Pittsburgh," Magnitogorsk, on the eastern slopes of the Ural Mountains, the twenty-year-old was first an electric welder and then, after his role in construction had ended, a foreman and chemist in a coke and chemicals by-products plant. He lived in a barracks, suffered from the arctic wintry cold and the summer stifling heat, studied evenings, married a Russian girl—in short, lived for five years as a Russian among Russians, an opportunity very few Americans have had, particularly in such circumstances. Indeed, most young Americans would probably not have survived that rigorous life, just as many

young Soviet citizens lost their lives falling from scaffolds, from improperly treated injuries, cold, and exhaustion.

No other description of life in a new steel city provides such a graphic description of the life of workers under the First Five Year Plan. Scott had a clear eye for detail and produced a chronicle which includes the ugliness and the squalor as well as the endurance and the dedication. The shortages of food, housing, and equipment, the vast differentials in wages and salaries, the existence of comfortable suburbs for specialists, officials, and foreigners while Bashkir shepherds only a month away from medieval times froze to death in tents, the almost incredible inefficiency and waste, the role of the GPU and of prison labor, the purges—all these aspects of life in Magnitogorsk are revealed by Scott. At the same time, he also describes the rising tempo, the desperate drive to build, and the ultimate creation of a “socialist city” and a modern steel industry.

Scott wrote late in 1941, after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, and his veneration for Stalin would be considered unworthy even in the Soviet Union today. Nevertheless, *Behind the Urals* stands as a most revealing description of an iron age in an iron country. Few other books provide such clear insights into the Soviet system, its weaknesses and strengths, the circumstances under which its peoples live and work, and the qualities and attitudes which characterized the 1930's.

Indiana University

ROBERT F. BYRNES

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BEHIND THE URALS

PART ONE

PART ONE Blood, Sweat, and Tears

I

I LEFT the University of Wisconsin in 1931 to find myself in an America sadly dislocated, an America offering few opportunities for young energy and enthusiasm.

I was smitten with the usual wanderlust. The United States did not seem adequate. I decided to go somewhere else. I had already been in Europe three times. Now I projected more far-flung excursions. Plans for a motor-cycle trip to Alaska, thence by home-made sailboat to Siberia and China came to naught. Where would I get the money to finance the project, and what would I do in China? I looked around New York for a job instead. There were no jobs to be had.

Something seemed to be wrong with America. I began to read extensively about the Soviet Union, and gradually came to the conclusion that the Bolsheviks had found answers to at least some of the questions Americans were asking each other. I decided to go to Russia to work, study, and to lend a hand in the construction of a society which seemed to be at least one step ahead of the American.

Following wise parental counsel I learned a trade before going

to Russia. I went to work as welder's apprentice in the General Electric plant in Schenectady, and several months later received a welder's certificate. Armed with this, with credentials from the Metal Workers' Union of which I was an active member, and with letters from several personal friends, I set off for Berlin, where I applied for a Soviet visa.

For some five weeks I lived with friends in Wedding, went to Communist demonstrations, and attended numerous turbulent political meetings organized by several parties. Things were bad in Germany. It was shocking to see thousands of able-bodied men living with their families in the Laubenkolonien, the German Hoovervilles, while block after block of apartment houses in Berlin where they had previously lived stood empty. Such things, I felt sure, did not happen in the Soviet Union.

In due course of time Soviet consular wheels ground out my visa and I entrained for Moscow. For ten days I bounced back and forth between several Soviet organizations, trying to make arrangements for a job. The welding trust was glad to give me work. They needed welders in many places. They were not able to sign me up, however, until the visa department had given me permission to remain in the Soviet Union as a worker. The latter organization could grant such permission only to people with jobs. Neither would put anything in writing.

Finally arrangements were completed, and I started out on the four-day train trip to a place called Magnitogorsk on the eastern slopes of the Ural Mountains.

I was very happy. There was no unemployment in the Soviet Union. The Bolsheviks planned their economy and gave opportunities to young men and women. Furthermore, they had got away from the fetishization of material possessions, which, my good parents had taught me, was one of the basic ills of our American civilization. I saw that most Russians ate only black bread, wore one suit until it disintegrated, and used old news-

papers for writing letters and office memoranda, rolling cigarettes, making envelopes, and for various personal functions.

I was about to participate in the construction of this society. I was going to be one of many who cared not to own a second pair of shoes, but who built blast furnaces which were their own. It was September, 1932, and I was twenty years old.

II

I_N 1940, Winston Churchill told the British people that they could expect nothing but blood, sweat, and tears. The country was at war. The British people did not like it, but most of them accepted it.

Ever since 1931 or thereabouts the Soviet Union has been at war, and the people have been sweating, shedding blood and tears. People were wounded and killed, women and children froze to death, millions starved, thousands were court-martialed and shot in the campaigns of collectivization and industrialization. I would wager that Russia's battle of ferrous metallurgy alone involved more casualties than the battle of the Marne. All during the thirties the Russian people were at war.

It did not take me long to realize that they ate black bread principally because there was no other to be had, wore rags because they could not be replaced.

In Magnitogorsk I was precipitated into a battle. I was deployed on the iron and steel front. Tens of thousands of people were enduring the most intense hardships in order to build blast furnaces, and many of them did it willingly, with

boundless enthusiasm, which infected me from the day of my arrival.

I plunged into the life of the town with the energy of youth. I literally wore out my Russian grammar, and in three months I was making myself understood. I gave away many of the clothes I had brought with me, and dressed more or less like the other workers on the job. I worked as hard and as well as my comparatively limited experience and training permitted.

I was liberally rewarded. My fellow workers accepted me as one of themselves. The local authorities urged me to study, and arranged for me to be accepted into the 'Komvuz,' or Communist University, to which only Communist Party members were usually admitted. They helped me to make arrangements to go on trips around the country.

While political leaders in Moscow were scheming and intriguing, planning and organizing, I worked in Magnitogorsk with the common soldiers, the steel workers, the simple people who sweated and shed tears and blood.

For five years I worked in Magnitogorsk. I saw a magnificent plant built. I saw much sweat and blood, many tears.

PART TWO

PART TWO A Day in Magnitogorsk

I

THE big whistle on the power house sounded a long, deep, hollow six o'clock. All over the scattered city-camp of Magnitogorsk, workers rolled out of their beds or bunks and dressed in preparation for their day's work.

I climbed out of bed and turned on the light. I could see my breath across the room as I woke my roommate, Kolya. Kolya never heard the whistle. Every morning I had to pound his shoulder for several seconds to arouse him.

We pushed our coarse brown army blankets over the beds and dressed as quickly as we could — I had good American long woolen underwear, fortunately; Kolya wore only cotton shorts and a jersey. We both donned army shirts, padded and quilted cotton pants, similar jackets, heavy scarves, and then ragged sheepskin coats. We thrust our feet into good Russian 'valinkis' — felt boots coming up to the knee. We did not eat anything. We had nothing on hand except tea and a few potatoes, and there was no time to light a fire in our little home-made iron stove. We locked up and set out for the mill.

It was January, 1933. The temperature was in the neighbor-

hood of thirty-five below. A light powdery snow covered the low spots on the ground. The high spots were bare and hard as iron. A few stars crackled in the sky and some electric lights twinkled on the blast furnaces. Otherwise the world was bleak and cold and almost pitch-dark.

It was two miles to the blast furnaces, over rough ground. There was no wind, so our noses did not freeze. I was always glad when there was no wind in the morning. It was my first winter in Russia and I was not used to the cold.

Down beside the foundation of Blast Furnace No. 4 there was a wooden shanty. It was a simple clapboard structure with a corrugated-iron roof nailed on at random. Its one big room was dominated by an enormous welded iron stove placed equidistant from all the walls, on a plate of half-inch steel. It was not more than half-past six when Kolya and I walked briskly up to the door and pushed it open. The room was cold and dark. Kolya fumbled around for a moment for the switch and then turned on the light. It was a big five-hundred-watt bulb hanging from the ceiling and it illuminated every corner of the bare room. There were makeshift wooden benches around the walls, a battered table, and two three-legged stools stood in a corner. A half-open door opposite the entrance showed a tremendous closet whose walls were decorated with acetylene torches, hose, wrenches, and other equipment. The floor of the closet was littered with electrodes, carbide generators, and dirt. The walls were bare except for two cock-eyed windows and a wall telephone. Kolya, the welders' foreman, was twenty-two, big-boned, and broad. There was not much meat on him, and his face had a cadaverous look which was rather common in Magnitogorsk in 1933. His unkempt, sawdust-colored hair was very long, and showed under his fur hat. The sheepskin coat which he wore was ragged from crawling through narrow pipes and worming his way into various odd corners. At every tear

the wool came through on the outside and looked like a Polish customs officer's mustache. His hands were calloused and dirty; the soles of the valinkis on his feet were none too good. His face and his demeanor were extremely energetic.

The telephone rang. Kolya picked up the receiver and growled in a husky voice, 'Who do you want? . . . Yeah, speaking. . . . No, I don't know. Nobody's here yet. Call up in half an hour.' He hung up, unbuttoned his coat, blew his nose on the floor. I went into the closet and got our emergency stove. It was an iron frame, wound haphazardly with asbestos tape and eighth-inch steel wire. I put it down near the desk and Kolya took two wires and connected them to a couple of terminals on the wall. The light dimmed and a low hum told of the low resistance of the coil, which was red-hot within half a minute. Kolya grunted, took the inverted electric light socket, which served as an inkwell, and put it on the floor under the stove. While he was waiting for the ink to thaw out, he opened the drawer of the table and pulled out some threadbare dirty papers.

The door opened and two besheepskinned figures entered the room. 'All right, you guys, how about a fire?' said Kolya, without looking up. 'We can't heat this whole room by electricity.' The two riggers pulled their scarves down from around their noses, took off their gloves, and rubbed the frost from their eyelashes. 'Cold,' said one to the other. 'Nada zakurit!'¹ They approached the electric stove, produced rolls of dirty newspaper and a sack of 'Makhorka,' a very cheap grade of tobacco, and rolled themselves newspaper cigarettes as big as Havana cigars. I rolled one too and we lit them from the stove. The riggers were youngish and had not shaved for several days. Their blue peasant eyes were clear and simple, but their foreheads and cheeks were scarred with frostbite, their hands

¹ 'It is necessary to smoke.'