

## A Left Notebook

It is absurd to judge Russian public opinion by Hungary or Poland. The Russians have consecrated Russian Communism with too much blood. Apart from those dead in Siberia over seven million men lost their lives in the War. Their memory still lives. People wept in the streets when they spoke of peace. The Russian mass cannot vote for alternate leadership. But the Party has given it a sense of participation and historic responsibility which Western governments give their people only in time of war. The Russian people have not read Kaffka or Faulkner as a small minority of us has done. But one can discuss Dostoevsky or Tolstoy with one's neighbour in the bus. And a history professor did not think it beneath his dignity to spend time and energy drumming an appreciation of Western art into the heads of a group of ordinary workmen at the Festival Exhibition of Painting in Gorki Park. Russia has little understanding of Vivaldi or Webern but it flocks to Beethoven and Tchaikovsky symphony concerts. And those getting a stiff dose of the Bolshoi Theatre over TV do not seem to express any desire for parlour games. Everything is politics in Russia but politics is something more than politics.

Ivory-towerism, much as the political sectarianism some of us Western Socialists are wont to favour, are considered alike a crime against the common good. As an artist it is one's duty to give to the people, to communicate effectively.

The Soviet regime, paradoxical as ever, has created a level of mass aspiration and culture it does not altogether satisfy. Russia is still very much a police state,

and the bureaucracy still makes mistakes that have not yet been recognised. It is impossible to get any good Comsomol to admit even in secret what might be in tomorrow's "Pravda."

Orwell's *1984* and Kaffka's *Castle*, though not perhaps the *Trial* are still horribly true of Russia today. Double-think abounds. When I told bright young Comsomols that it was a pity Western journalists were allowed to see so little, they said we were free to go anywhere we pleased—"Pozhaluista!" "It is you who do not allow our delegations to visit you," came the agonizing reply. When we did go for an "illicit" expedition, to a town 55 miles East, we were stopped four times for our papers. Our festival cards saved us. One cannot arrest a Festival participant under a banner proclaiming "Peace and Friendship". We were not exactly shepherded back to Moscow, but we were accompanied by a plain clothes man. And at the station we had to change from an outer suburban steam train to an inner suburban electric train and there were some 20 policemen on the platform to see to it that we got on to the right train—more than was necessary to keep drunks in order. A friend of mine who had been personal interpreter in London to a high-up member of the Bolshoi Company could not get that member's home telephone number for six days, and then only by subterfuge.

Telephone directories have a largely metaphysical existence; besides they never contain the telephone numbers of embassies. I almost had to show my passport at the Press center to get the address of the Swiss Embassy. There are no timetables or maps at railway stations. One has to deduce distances from fares

## Russia Alive

Michael Kullman

lists. It is quite normal to get mis-directed in Moscow. This is not a result of bad-will. It all forms part of a system in which surplus information is not left lying around. One knows what it is one's business to know.

Fortunately this is not the case regarding science and technology. A Western scientist I met in Moscow noticed that Soviet publications include many things that would be considered trade secrets in the West, as well as occasional revelations of "classified" matter, to the great distress of Western military specialists. There is growing discontent with the lack of "vital" economic statistics, despite the prevalence of the typically uncritical attitude expressed by "What does everyone want to know that for? Those in charge have the figures. That is enough." A great deal could happen if more figures were published. The trouble from the Party's standpoint is that too many, fed on political economy since childhood, might understand what had gone wrong. Ever more mistakes would have to be recognised. Here again mass culture is a political force to be taken into account.

The standard of living—bar aluminium cooking equipment, television and photography (Muscovites who tend to own a Leica or nothing simply failed to understand why the West should produce so many mediocre cameras)—is still low. Overcrowding is appalling. What we tolerate as a scandal is for Moscow normal. I saw a family of five in 13 square metres of living space. A £15 suit costs an average worker's monthly wage—some 700 roubles. Shoddy shoes are priced from 200 to 400. There is little choice in department stores designed for crowds rather than

goods. The general impression from a walk round "Univermag" and GUM was that of a Bank Holiday crowd swarming through Gammage's at the end of a three-week sale during which none of the counters had been replenished. It was rumoured in Western circles that the stores had been stocked up for the Festival. This, and the presence in Moscow of some 300,000 persons come from all over Russia "to have a look at the Festival" might account for some of the crush. Cameras were selling like hot cakes, and with about as much service as one gets buying potatoes. Moscow seems the shopping centre of a large area of Russia and after our two escapades to towns outside the twenty-five mile diplomatic zone (to Serpukhov, 60 miles S.W. and Voskresensk, 55 miles S.E.) Moscow seemed an oasis in the desert.

### Hardships and compensations

New housing is poor and there has been a marked regression in building technique. Many of us fell on the stairs on the morning of our arrival. On coming round from the three-day train journey we saw the explanation. The steps were all of different size! A staff of ten men were employed during the duration of our stay keeping the plumbing in order. Architects amongst us, shown round the building sites behind the Lenin University (alia MGU!) were shocked at the absence of spirit levels. Their Soviet counterparts told them mistakes had been recognised, and building techniques were to be revolutionized in the next five-year plan (starting 1960). Factories making prefabricated sections were already built. Lacking steel, Russia, unlike the United States, cannot really afford the cold war. There is much covert unemployment, or over-employment relative to capital. Most factories work round the clock and there is a great deal of surplus ice-cream selling, and street sweeping.

Despite hardships there are "compensations"; A medical certificate sends a worker whose productivity falls off to a "sanatorium"—a rest home with a large quota of nurses and doctors. General medical services are free, drugs heavily subsidised (five million units of penicillin cost just over two roubles with a 15 per cent reduction if on prescription, free if administered in hospital). Pensions seem adequate. An engineer earning 1,200 could look forward to 900 roubles a month at 60, a woman textile worker earning 750 could look forward to 400 at 55. On the other hand we met a woman of 61 who was forced to supplement her 350 roubles a month pension with a further 350 doing messenger work for a ministry. It is normal for mothers of small children to work full time. There was a round-the-clock creche at the cotton mill I visited in addition to a well equipped day nursery. Factory canteens, open to the general public, serve good meals at reasonable prices (cabbage soup

with a sizeable piece of veal, roast goose and mashed potatoes came to 5.13). The bill of fare seemed cost-accounted and specifies the number of grams of meat, vegetable, liquid, etc.

Education, however, is to be the regime's strong point. Ten-year schools from seven to 17 giving an ail-round education (but no Latin or Greek) are universal and compulsory. These exist in all but a few outlying areas. Owing to building shortage they operate a two-shift system. Almost all the young people we met seemed to be studying something whether working or not. Extra-mural degrees count for the same as ones obtained by full-time study. There is little neurosis amongst students, who knew there was a useful job waiting for them even if not in Moscow. One or two we met, fearing relative exile, hung on in Moscow paying the black market rate for accommodation (500 a month for a small room—200 for a corner of a room). This they said they could earn in three night's work doing technical translation. Outside Moscow alcoholism was rampant. At Voskresensk we saw workers drink Vodka by the tumbler. One of them had sat on his Saturday afternoon's shopping. Another, in a suburban station swore at a woman behind the buffet in terms which, in the West, would have caused a fight. But Russians are understanding. There is puritanism in Russia as there was in the United States in the first two decades of this century. There is also the reason for it. Much has been done to curb hooliganism by the expedient of two to three weeks forced labour in the streets of one's home town. But at Voskresensk neither man nor woman is very safe after dark. The pre-conditions for partial prohibition exist. At Moscow this has already been put into effect. Four months ago the "Probegalki's", or squalid little bistros, were closed. One cannot drink in the streets for fear of the militia. It is hard to drink at home unless one can get one's neighbours drunk. And one has to queue to spend some 50 roubles a head at a "dinner and dance" restaurant. Cinemas have to be packed every night to fulfil their quotas. Russia's rulers have little respect for escapism, which is after all in every society that is at all imperfect, a human right.

### East and West

From the very first day of the Festival it was easy to get a crowd about one the moment it was realised one spoke Russian and willing to debate East and West. Where there was no way round the language barrier, the swopping of badges, postcards, names and addresses and coins helped establish brief and desperate contact. Wherever we went as delegates we were cheered and applauded. Adults as well as delegates asked for our autographs. A state enter-

prise had the business sense to market folders with the flags of all countries for the purpose. And when night came small groups would crowd round a Briton, Canadian, American or Frenchman, not to disperse until the small hours. These were composed largely of ordinary people who had followed the signs to hostels where there were Westerners and had been lucky enough to find one of us prepared to talk. Later these gatherings were stiffened with professional agitators who would shoot "Pravda" editorials at one, striving to drown what ordinary people might say in a flood of orthodoxy. Occasionally one noticed in addressing street corner gatherings persons whose presence made people speak differently. Several times I met Russians who preferred to talk of public matters in private, and would say "not here". Typical questions would be: "How is it with the struggle for peace in your country?" "Did you have much trouble getting out to come here?" "What do they write about us in your papers?" and again and again "How is it with education?" These one would answer as best one could. One could say that "we" in the West did not think of peace in terms of struggle, but in face of the tremendous earnestness of one's interlocutors to point out that "struggle for peace" was a contradiction in terms was disgustingly Oxonian. One had to explain that we needed no exit permit to leave Britain, and that although Christopher Mayhew, the NUS bureaucracy and a number of top people had sent their curses they were not in a position to prevent our coming. One was forced to admit that with a few exceptions (viz., Crankshaw, Cartier Bresson, Gunther and Sherman) Western journalists had systematically failed to give us any idea of what Russian life was really like. But one had to add that if they confined their reports to "Kremlinology" they were not entirely to blame.

### The Soviet "we"

One could feel little pride in describing the intricacies of our three-class system of education and its effects. People from the back of a group would ask "What about parties?" and would listen enthralled to what summary description one could manage. They would ask "Do they really read the 'Daily Worker'?" as though they thought perhaps not. People asked about strikes, which Soviet citizens thought symptomatic of mass unemployment. Even bright young Comsomols seemed not to have the slightest inkling of large-scale modern capitalism. They thought of capitalism in terms of the British coal industry before nationalisation, never in terms of General Motors and I.C.I., a thing which left Western technological progress unexplained. They asked why "we" had gone to war over Suez, why "we" had received B. and K. so poorly

and sent Crabb under their cruiser. One had to explain that "we" in the West do not have "moral and political unity". Moscow made me change my mind about Nina and the Hats. Soviet action over the Ponomareva affair was not a remains of Stalinist boorishness. It was based on domestic public opinion. In Britain we live in a culture that lacks the concept of collective hospitality. In Russia as delegates we could do no wrong. To steal from us would have been a political offence. The attitude the U.S.S.R. took over Ponomareva should be compared to the attitude an average British family would take over their little daughter staying with friends. Should the small daughter pocket a silver spoon, the thing to do would be to inform the parents, not ring for the police. Russia considered Ponomareva a small daughter, and Britain a potentially friendly family. Many in the West think of the Soviet WE as a huge piece or doublethink. It was currently thought that the Festival had received a vast state subsidy; if festival goers were greeted it was because "spontaneous" demonstrations had been organised. All this fits in with our picture of the world behind the iron curtain—children being forced to draw doves on postcards, party pressure being put upon people to turn up on station platforms in their best clothes, etc., etc. We were funnily enough the guests of people as well as state. A lottery had been held to raise 300 million roubles. The prizes were negligible but people knew it; so were the organisation costs, as tickets were distributed by Comsomols, young trade unionists and pioneers. A great deal more tickets could have been sold.

### Lockjawed logic

The ease with which one could get assent to Westernising propositions ranging from "Your H-bomb testers and disarmament negotiators are no less cynical than our own", to "What you need is a new Diaghilev", made me feel at times that the status quo would not be safe if the uniformed militia and army were not reinforced by the so-called secret police (in fact as I learnt from a criminal detective they are but the higher paid specialists of the police force). I once made roughly the same point to a Comsol "organiser". (There were one of these to every three interpreters, their function being to keep the interpreters politically up to the mark.) He took it without humour, and in the resulting argument each fell into the stale opposition of East and West. But such relapses into lockjawed Cold War logic were rare.

Discussions about disarmament were particularly exciting in view of the Soviet man in the street's passionate interest in world politics. I would describe Vicky cartoons, particularly the one in which Eisenhower, Macmillan and Khrushchev are to be seen mouthing diplomatic phrases at a round table conference each listening to his pet H-bang with a voluptuous smile. This and the one in which the three are seen as angels

on the way to heaven each clutching the bomb and singing "My bomb is bigger and better than yours" used to get a loud laugh. Time and time again, when the agitator or whoever happened to be taking the "Pravda" line spoke of Russia wanting no bases and taking no interest in the domestic affairs of neighbouring states, the *vox populi* would mutter "pravilno" (or "hear, hear") to my version of the Western line, and even on occasion take up my defence. Amongst the cosmopolitan minded of whom there are many in Moscow there was even considerable awareness of the facts about Hungary. There had been protest meetings at the new University in November, some half-dozen arrests, and some hundred students sent into exile—school teaching and forced residence in some distant village I was told. A large number of people from Minsk to Moscow listened to the B.B.C. despite jamming. All those who told me they did so thought little of the Voice of America which they described as "propaganda and nonsense". This is something to be borne in mind by those who have recently criticised the B.B.C. Russian service for its lack of Freedom pep-talks. But the overwhelming majority of people at street gatherings firmly believed the official myth of planned counter revolution armed by Western red cross parcels and ambulances.

### Kruzkhii or a-politicals ?

On returning to London I was button-holed by a Western journalist who typically enough asked me whether there were any signs of intellectual opposition. A small number amongst the British delegation claim to have met students belonging to "dissident" *kruzkhii*. Even if I had heard of the existence of such circles while in Moscow, I should not write of them. To do so would merely attract the attention of the competent authorities. "You see, comrade, even Western journals are writing about them." What negative opposition I did encounter took the form of "a-politism" common amongst the cosmopolitan minded intellectual elite, and expressed by "don't let us talk about that, don't we know it!" in answer to Western criticism. Russia's leaders are hated for their Philistinism by some of the most privileged members of the population. There is continual tension between the higher intelligentsia and the party which panders to and seeks to enforce a type of mass philistinism. Constructive opposition comes from those "technocrats", "specialists" (doctors, engineers, etc.) whose concrete preoccupation with Russia's problems—be they social or economic—forces them to criticise this or that party policy or project on factual grounds. If more changes are to come in the Soviet Union it will be through a series of victories of these "specialists", "technocrats"—I should like to call them Empiricists—over the Philosophers, or bright young men, whose one belief is that the Party is always right, and who

are the Jesuits of the regime. Two types of mind exist and are being formed in the Soviet Union today. Specialists—be they town-planners or doctors—who out of intellectual honesty and devotion to their work are bound from time to time to disagree and criticise in public some Party plan, and those bright young Comsomols or Party members who, whatever their occupation, will use their minds and energies to justify the Party—be it right or wrong. The difference between them is that one will criticise freely what he feels the Party has done wrong, the other will in face of criticism "admit there have been mistakes" only if "Pravda" so many days or weeks ago has already done so. For to say today what might appear in Pravda tomorrow is to "anticipate" and risk dividing the Party! "We could not risk dividing the Party" is a stock phrase in current re-justifications of Stalinist errors. "Anticipation", though on a considerably larger scale, was Trotsky's crime!

### The uses of Marxism

There seems to be little Marxist re-thinking in Russia. What there is of it is unlikely to be influential as there is surprisingly little spontaneous interest in Marx. He is known mostly from quotations. Marx is far from being THE source of Russian Communism and has very little to say of a society supposed to be classless. And it is unreasonable to expect Soviet citizens to think of their regime as State Capitalism. Marx is used chiefly in teaching hatred for Capitalism, and provides bright young Comsomols with a source of ignorance about present-day conditions in the West which serves as basis for their hatred. But if Marx himself is little read, the philosophy of the Theses on Feuerbach has been put into practice with alarming thoroughness. Soviet Marxist-Leninism, the official philosophy, can on the face of things be summed up in the catchphrase "the-party's-always-right". But this formula has hidden depths. Marx defined philosophy as "critical practical revolutionary activity". That the Party's activity in Russia fits the definition is not hard to prove. Party activity—philosophy, in Russia—comprises much that in the West is regarded as an Academic discipline, to wit the whole field of sociology, much of psychology, and in particular the psychology and sociology of labour-management relations. Where the West tends to rely on counselling, or the couch, Soviet society looks to Trade Union or Party Organisations. If a worker's output declines for psychogenic reasons he is told to go and discuss his problems with Trade Union or Party organisers. If a young Comsol get mixed up a little, an elder comrade may proffer personal advice in an official capacity. The Party is no less concerned with the psychological balance of its members than the Church is concerned with that of its priests. Neurotics tend to be regarded by both as unfit. Marx said the aim of philosophy should

be not to understand but to transform the world. Transformation may be economic, but the Russian revolution has been industrial as well as political. The Party still claims to be revolutionary. What we should call industrial or technical problems are to Russians part of transforming the world. This task is the Party's prerogative. To criticise as an outsider, or to express scepticism is blasphemy. Only those in a position to do something have the right to criticise. The need for thought police, for continual investigations against counter-revolutionaries, is something accepted and believed by the Soviet man in the street, not however by survivors of the ancient regime. "They have invented a new logic," a score of them remarked. If some of us were disappointed at the extent of de-Stalinisation it is that we were mistaken in our expectations. One cannot possibly expect the kind of de-Stalinisation in Russia that could take place in Poland. In the words of a Polish journalist, "Poland never had Stalinism: Stalinism does not come only from above." The idea that what one's neighbour says or thinks about matters of common concern is itself **obchie delo** or of common concern is something deeply rooted in the Russian way of life. Being called to the police station and given a lecture on one's attitude as though one were a schoolboy before a headmaster does not strike the Russian as unnatural. Russians do not think thought police unnatural. The removal of some pressure does not, and cannot be expected to turn them into Westerners. It is perhaps that Russians are more collectivist in mentality than we are. It is something that can be traced to the religious life of the pre-revolutionary peasant. It may help explain why Russians considered members of the British delegation almost individually responsible for the misdeeds of Sir Anthony Eden, and the poor reception given B. and K.

Russia is still very much a police state. The abuses may have gone but the system is still there. Just as Americans prided themselves on having got rid of McCarthyism with the fall of McCarthy, so Russians pride themselves on having got rid of the evils of the system with the death of Stalin. Much of what was decried as the cult of the personality survives in Party worship. The worrying thing about Russia is the number of bright young Comsomols, keen Party members and army officers whose blind hatred of Capitalism equals if it does not surpass the fanaticism of the S.S. or the Hitler jugend. These are the priests of the cult of the Party. It is by no means improbable that if Khrushchev loses his battle, Russia will have to endure some five years rule by harder, younger men. But of course fanaticism may decline with age and with wealth. And there is in Russia today an ever growing number of people whose culture makes them immune to slogans and digests and whose specialised knowledge makes them conscious of Party shortcomings. In technologically advanced industries these have already got some measure of control; not so in backward ones. The reason for this is that 100 Tupolevs that cannot fly is not 100 Tupolevs, whereas 100 shirts that will shrink out of recognition when first washed is still 100 shirts. Keen Party members have little time to study aerodynamics.

Even the fiercest arguments with the most fanatical apologists ended on a note of agreement: the need for infinite cultural exchanges. These have already been instrumental in getting the phrase "English workers have not enough to eat" banished from third form English text-books. The biggest piece of anti-American propaganda at the Festival was not the altogether innocuous Hiroshima rally but the presence of only 150 Americans. I had to travel to Moscow to discover that the Italian Foreign Minister had refused the Soviet pianist

Richter a visa. It is common knowledge that had Mme. Rambert allowed her Ballet Company to perform in Moscow it would have lost its Arts Council Grant. The one thing the West has utterly failed to do is to produce the impression that all cultural barriers are of Kremlin origin. It would pay Western governments to subsidise both artists and travellers. It would pay the U.S. Government to pay film companies to give free copies of films to show in Russia. The Soviets could not then without lying tell their people that they cannot afford American films. "Tell that to the State Department," a friend of mine remarked. If only the State Department and Mr. Mayhew were not so blind. One thing the Festival has shown is that the time has come for an all-out cultural offensive. It is only too easy to adopt a belated cultural Stalinism as one's way of being right over Hungary. Perhaps the gang of Swiss youth who beat up Swiss Festival-goers on their return deserve a first prize in the "being right about Hungary" contest. But the question is "need others compete?" Even from a strictly Atlantic standpoint to show Russia some of the better sides of the West—its people, its art and its wealth—is one of the best ways of counter-acting Soviet domestic propaganda, and so relaxing some of the basis for world tension existing in Russian public opinion.

For let us face it—the Russian people being what they are—human contacts and cultural exchanges mean immeasurably more to them than they ever do to us. Perhaps our masses are uncultured, perhaps somehow in our culture we have lost the human touch, which Russians thanks to Communism or in spite of it, have managed to retain. The Great Enemy is neither Washington nor Moscow. It is those who need and want the Cold War.