

Ten years behind the iron curtain

Siberia

Land of exile
and of
industrialization

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In Paris
Les iles d'or
Librairie Plon
(1950)

From the chapter "The masters of the country" p. 121 / 127

... in Russia, where this pleasant play on words is circulating: "With us, there are no more classes, but only different categories of citizens."

The workers, too, feel with the greatest clarity: that there are "different categories" and what the exact role and social status of each is. The son of the laundress was not alone in speaking to me hatefully about "them" and "us." "Them" is the term that the working class uses to describe the ruling communist clique. The lower strata of Soviet society are very clearly aware of the social antagonisms between "them" and "us".

But the formula is not new. It is the traditional distinction that has existed in the popular language and in the consciousness of the people for centuries, since the division of society into classes, into inferiors and superiors, between the people and the power. By establishing the formula "them" and "us", the workers, the people, the inferiors of the soviet society are only showing publicly that, in spite of the promises and the first achievements of the October Revolution, the eternal antagonism has been maintained and that "basically nothing has changed".

However, Soviet workers are not backward-looking or passive enough to be content with returning to a bygone era. Creative humor and popular irony have found more adequate and new formulas to characterize the new legal form, the new specific clothing of the relationship between "them" and "us" in the USSR. Before I arrived in Siberia, when I was still in the Verkhnyo-Uralsk isolator, political deportees had told me that the working class circles (122) had already during the Nep found the following formula : the land is ours and the wheat is theirs, Baku is ours and the oil is theirs, the factories are ours and what they produce is theirs.

In Siberia, I heard workers saying bluntly:

— Now we are no longer workers but bosses. The workers are Stalin, Kaganovich, Molotov, Ovchinikov (the dictator of Krasnoyarsk) The Krasnoyarsk railway

workers, taking up this concept, had invented some very characteristic expressions. For example, when the Trans-Siberian Railway arrived, carrying only bureaucrats, specialists, their families, the new elite, the railwaymen said: "The workers' train is at the station. And when the dirty, crowded workers' train arrived, with people on the footboards, they would solemnly say: "The train of the bosses has arrived."

Other ironic expressions were even more biting:

— A funny thing has just happened to me, said a fellow deportation victim one day. Not far from the station, I met a peasant with his cart in the middle of the road. He was looking around with a puzzled look and, seeing me suddenly, he asked me:

"Citizen, do you know where the Central ⁽¹⁾ is? Is it around here?"

— The "Central"? But there is no central prison here, there is only the municipal prison, it is over there...

— But no, it's not the prison I'm talking about, it's the railroad yards; that's what they call them.

So this was the title that the people now gave to the famous factory that all Siberia, all Russia, once called "The Citadel," because it was a real revolutionary citadel.

The supremacy of the Soviet bureaucracy, as a ruling class far above the proletariat, became particularly visible after the Five-Year Plan. The disappearance of the last traces of private enterprise, which had remained since the Nep and had so confused the situation, exposed the antagonism between the proletariat in the factories, sovkhozes and kolkhozes and the bureaucracy. They are, so to speak, face to face on the battlefield of classes. On the one hand the privileged, the boss, on the other the exploited, the serf. Neither one nor the other fears the "third force", that of the boss working on his own account and for his personal profit, who has disappeared in deportation or has been "liquidated".

In these conditions, the official terminology that speaks of the working class as a dominant and privileged class appears to the workers as a bitter derision. And this is what led the working class, after the Five Year Plan, to ironically ask "Where are the bosses?"

The general conviction that "everything is ruined", that the Revolution has finally led only to a new enslavement of the proletariat, this is, in my opinion, if I judge from my observations of 1926 and 1936, what fundamentally differentiates the proletarian psychology after the Five-Year Plan from that of the time of the Nep, and even during the first Five-Year Plan, when the proletariat still had doubts, hopes, illusions, when it still said, thinking about the social results of the Revolution and the Five-Year Plan, "that perhaps all this could turn out well for our benefit".

The bitter jokes about "where are the bosses?" only reflect the absolute impossibility of the working class to lead a mass struggle, its total impotence. An oppressed class that is about to attack does not talk about its enemy in an ironic tone, but with rage and frothing at the mouth. The present state of the Soviet proletariat is as follows: it is well aware of the situation, but it is not in a condition to pass to an open class struggle. And why is this? Why do we find only bitter disenchantment in its words? Let's try to penetrate a little further into the psychology of the Soviet worker.

¹ The Central, that is to say the "central prison". (Translator's note.)

What does the struggle lead to? What would be the point of a new revolution? To achieve the same result, says the Soviet proletariat, totally disappointed by the final results of the October Revolution. We have shed our blood, we have been hungry, and the fruits of the revolt are not for us, it is others (124) who benefit from the results of our sufferings... We will not be caught again. Once is enough.

It is not only a question of physical and psychological weariness due to the proximity of the Revolution, although this is an important factor. It is also because the masses see before them and against them, no longer the old ruling class, that of the bourgeois and the nobles, but a new and original class, the bureaucracy of the communists and specialists, partly from the people, of worker and peasant origin. Private property was replaced by state property. This is an unprecedented historical event. The masses must have time to adapt to this event and to conform their psychology to it. A new conception of the social order and a new program of action must somehow emerge... It is not enough to call the masses to fight, they must know why they are fighting and for what purpose.

The working masses feel it, but in their sub-consciousness. Isolated individuals lead a conscious struggle, I have met some examples of this.

Thus, I saw in the room of a young worker many books, and on the wall and table portraits of Bielinsky, the famous literary critic of the years 1830-1840, the time of the worst tsarist reaction. This worker was a carpenter and cabinetmaker. He loved his job, was well paid and earned a lot of money from his private commissions. The new gentlemen of the Soviet society were thirsty for beautiful things and he was overloaded with orders. After a while I found out why he admired Bielinsky: - "Everything that is published now is lies and rubbish. I can't read such nonsense. On the other hand, I feel that Bielinsky loved the truth and that he was sincere. That's why I like him." He had bought the complete works of Bielinsky, disparate editions from 1830-1840 and the complete edition from the end of the last century.

This young worker felt a fierce hatred for the current bureaucratic regime. He was most indignant about the workerist attitude of the speeches and behaviors, while (125) everything was directed against the worker. He could tell you for hours how the factory manager behaved in front of the workers and how he changed his manner, his vocabulary as well as his outfit, when he went home to his environment. Or how the secretary of the company's cell, a forty-year-old man, used to lure young and beautiful female workers by promising them his support. Or how all the executives, the director, the main engineer, the secretary of the party section, the head of the production workshop, built themselves a palace at the princess's expense, etc. A burning need to reveal everything consumed this young worker and made him similar to the "frenetic Vissarion" (2), who so ardently stigmatized the hypocrisy and lies of Nicholas I's time. If the reader finds in this book some documentation about the life of political deportees in Siberia, it is to him and his passion for the truth. He had put a double bottom to my suitcase so that they could escape the perspicacious eye of the GPU.

In fact, he was ready to sacrifice his life in the struggle against the reigning bureaucratic order. "Down with the bureaucracy as down with the bourgeois and the nobles!" was his motto. He made and saw no essential difference between the old and the new masters. But he himself did not know what should be put in the place of

² Nickname given to Bielinsky by his friends in the Intelligentsia. (Translator's note.)

the present bureaucratic machine. His great originality, and what made him exceptional in my opinion, was that in the midst of the general apathy he was aware of the need to elaborate a positive political program, that his thoughts were working on it and that he was doing everything possible to achieve it. There was no question of a return to the capitalism of old. But he considered it insufficient and ridiculous to simply accuse Stalin of a serious breach of Marxist-Leninist principles. "As long as the bureaucrats can refer to Marx and Lenin, it means that they too are wrong." "Lenin himself said that the leader answers not only for himself but for his (126) followers. Now, Stalin was indeed one of his followers," he liked to repeat with naive obstinacy. And from there he considered absolutely useless to want to repeat always in a purely mechanical way the formulas and the programs of Marx and Lenin, even if they were the best intended. A new revolution needs a new program. After a new experience, new deductions are needed.

All this was obviously far from a positive program, but the mere fact that such passionate research could take place, in spite of its exceptional character, indicated that post-Five-Year Plan Russia was on the way to new thinking.

Other manifestations of this state of mind, less vivid on the ideological level, were no less symbolic because they took place on the practical level.

In one of the main factories in Krasnoyarsk, a single worker was actively engaged in revolutionary and anti-government propaganda in a group of more than 30 people in his workshop. They held joint illegal meetings outside the city in summer and in winter in each other's houses. Sometimes they intervened during official assemblies. These workers provided the illegal immigrants with false papers to prevent them from being caught, etc. I witnessed his activity for more than a year. No one denounced him. And by the time I returned to Europe he was continuing his work.

In another factory, the workers went on strike ⁽³⁾ or, as they put it, decided "to stop work for the elucidation of a doubtful question".

An opposition worker who was living illegally was able to hide for two weeks in a sovkhos. Those who hid him were workers, some of whom were communists or komsomols, or even students of the Institute of Agronomy. No one handed him over, they brought him food and, so that he could continue his journey, they provided him with false papers.

(127) He admitted to me that he was very surprised at the general mood. He was a Trotskyist, and for him Stalin was still a "comrade" who was on the wrong track because he "did not take sufficient account" of the needs of the working masses. It was a great shock for him to realize that the workers of the sovkhos did not want to hear about "improvement" of the official policy, nor about reforms, nor about substitution of individuals, nor about anything similar. "Everything must be rooted out," they said. For them, the communists at the top were only members of the new ruling class, not comrades at all. But the witness to these remarks was also surprised by the conclusions of the sovkhosians. They were not talking about redistributing the sovkhos lands and a return to smallholding, but about "replacing the present sovkhos of brigandage and slavery with collective farming in a spirit of friendship and comradeship." Russian workers want to go forward, not backward.

³ It is known that the U.S.S.R. does not recognize the right to strike to the worker. The Soviet state being by definition a "workers" state, any strike becomes by definition "anti-worker". (Translator's note.)

France in the 19th century was "the country of revolutions".

They followed one another and all the reactions that occurred in the meantime only prepared the ground for a new revolution each time more advanced in the social field. Is Russia not the homeland of the social revolutions of the 20th century? Will the world not witness, in the near future, a much more advanced and radical social revolution, and in Russia itself, than that of October 1917?

I do not affirm it, but I would like to give some explanations of this thesis. The social aspirations of the masses, which exploded with such force between 1917 and 1920, are not satisfied. The will to live and the vital power of the working masses of Russia is so great, so powerful, so invincible, in spite of the terrible ordeals and sufferings of the last twenty years, that they must find an outlet. The technique established by the Five-Year Plan can provide a sufficient economic basis for a new creative impulse of the masses in the social sphere...