

Rememberances of (Socialist) Things Past: Collectivization and Industrialization before the Great Purges

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1. Maurice Hindus, Red Bread: Collectivization in a Russian Village. Indiana University Press 1988 (orig. 1931) xix + 372 pp. Foreword by Ronald Grigor Suny.
2. John Scott, Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia's City of Steel. 1989 (orig. 1942), xxv + 306, 2 appendices. Introduction by Stephen Kotkin.

These two books, written by Americans who observed (Hindus) and participated (Scott) in the massive transformation of the U.S.S.R. in the years before World War Two, offer evocative portraits of socialism's early, heroic period. Both are notable for the intense energy and movement they portray in Soviet society and for noting the emerging contradictions in the Stalinist system. Both are notable, too, for the questions they imply about the current transformation in the Soviet Union and East Europe. In this sense they are much more than reflections on a fleeting moment of history, but are guideposts to the current East European malaise.

Hindus' book is the more ethnographic of the two; Scott's more the impassioned political statement. In the former, we are treated to detailed descriptions of daily life in the Belorussian village of the author's youth, to which he has returned to see the socialist transformation firsthand. In some ways Hindus is the perfect ethnographer. As a former native he appreciates the diverse cast of characters that comprise the peasant village and easily avoids the gross generalizations about the peasantry (e.g. they're so many potatoes in a sack) that plague our understanding of them to this day. Still Hindus is far enough removed in time and social status from his former village friends (he emigrated in 1905, and was a Jew and an academic to boot) to enable a fairly nuanced analysis of their changing lives.

Thus Hindus takes us on an extended tour of life in the changing peasant community. We see births, marriages and deaths. We overhear village gossip, attend exuberant dances of youth and participate in bitki, the Eastertide egg breaking competition. However, suffusing all these events and relations is the ever-present processes of collectivization and class war. The tension over

them is palpable and effects every village moment. Especially poignant are the constant debates between village elders and revolutionary youth and that between the hesitant and committed toward collectivization. And over it all, the fate of the kulak hangs in the balance with only the reader knowledgeable about the sorry end that would confront them.

Unlike Hindus, John Scott hasn't the temperament for participant observation. His job was to help build socialism as challenge to the privileged classes of the capitalist West, the social stratum from which he himself derived. Following the advice of his radical, academic parents, he trained as a welder after dropping out of the University of Wisconsin. Subsequently, by a circuitous route, he ended up in the new Soviet town of Magnitogorsk, where the then-largest steel works in the world were under construction. Scott's portraits of Magnitogorsk, the raw lives and deaths of the workers, recent migrants from villages like Hindus discusses, are every bit as rich as those of Hindus'. However, underlying his observations was the personal joy and agony he, himself, felt at the events he described. The tales of early Soviet inefficiency were legion; machinery that didn't work, stolen raw materials, others bartered away for food and cigarettes. And the sense of comradeship Scott felt for all but the most authoritarian supervisors was especially touching. Still, the sense of doom and foreboding for the coming purges colors every word, even as he searches for any kind of rationale to explain the increasing agony of daily life in Magnitogorsk. In the end, Scott, like ourselves, is disillusioned and faced with explaining the unexplainable.

More than their evoking the past, both books also have a number of analogies with the current transformation in Eastern Europe and the U.S.S.R. For one, they fully capture the telescoping, speed and intensity of history in both periods and how people respond to such intense transformations. One really gets a sense for the feelings of urgency that motivate individuals in such times and how this urgency magnifies simple disagreements into larger scale social conflict.

The books also provide a real sense of the ambiguities that pervade periods of transformation: the endless, anguished, debate about terms, meanings and events; the uncertainties of the life which lay ahead; the absurdity of the unnecessary suffering of so many souls and the facile way this is dismissed as required by history, God or the Party line. Spectres haunt these books, just as they haunt the villages and towns of modern East Europe and the Soviet Union. Then, of course, they were the spectres of capitalism, the real fear of counter-

revolution and the often bizarre paranoia toward alleged class enemies. Today, the same fears are found. Now, though, they take the shape of other nationalities, Party recidivists and entrepreneurs. In the end, though, both sets of bogey-persons (to modernize the discourse of scapegoating) serve the same function; they force the energy of these societies inward toward unprofitable anger and away from the common task of social reconstruction. Stalin's ghost still walks among us!