BEHIND
THE URALS
An American Worker in
Russia’s City of Steel

BY
JOHN SCOTT

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Introduction

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In *Behind the Urals* John Scott takes a slow-motion camera to show us what it was like to live in the USSR during the formative period of the 1930s. Without losing sight of larger issues of interpretation and significance, Scott brings into sharp focus the often startling details of his life and the lives of those he came to know in the *new industrial city* of Magnitogorsk. This absorbing depiction of the story of Magnitogorsk is justifiably regarded as the classic firsthand account of the daily life of Stalinism.¹

Several decades after Stalin's death we are still debating the nature and causes of Stalinism, its relation to the October Revolution, and its bearing on our understanding of the current Soviet regime and society. These controversies impinge not only on the *way in which we write history*, but also on the *proportion of the state budget* that we allocate to the military and on the assumptions on which we base our foreign policy.

A full appreciation not only of Stalinism as a political system but of the experiences of working people during the reign of Stalin and of the relations between the political system and the people has proved elusive. One of the most intriguing and perplexing aspects of the debate on Stalinism continues to be the fact that

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while many Soviet citizens who lived through the Stalin era look back on it with horror, many others remember it as the most fulfilling time of their lives. Scott’s book offers many insights into this double-sided perception of Stalinist reality. Moreover, through the portrayal of living examples, Scott enables us to see that direct experience of hardship and repression coexisted in the hearts and minds of many people with a deeply felt satisfaction about the course of events and optimism about the future.

John Scott was born in Philadelphia on March 26, 1912. He came from an unusual background. His father, Scott Nearing, was a professor of economics at the prestigious Wharton School of Business of the University of Pennsylvania and a noted radical. In 1915 Professor Nearing was dismissed in an academic freedom case for his outspoken opposition to capitalism, and in 1918, as a result of his anti-war activities, he was indicted for sedition (though later acquitted). Scott Nearing joined the Socialist Party and the Communist Party, from which he was expelled in 1929 for refusing to alter a book manuscript to conform to the party line. Yet he remained a radical until his death in 1983 at the age of 100. He published scores of books, all from a leftist point of view, including some favorable to the USSR based on visits there in 1925 and after. Nearing’s wife, Nellie Seeds, whom he had married in 1908, was also highly educated and active in politics. They had two sons, the older of whom was John Scott Nearing.

It should come as no surprise, given his family background, that as a young man John Scott Nearing readily absorbed radical ideas and political activism. At the same time, he seems to have resented the enormous pressure to conform to the example of his parents, particularly his father, in whose shadow the whole family lived. At the age of seventeen or eighteen, to secure his own


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identity and independence, he changed his name, dropping the Nearing and becoming simply John Scott. Nevertheless, the critical perspective on his own society which his parents had transmitted to him was not abandoned; indeed, it was reinforced by his education outside the home at a series of exclusive schools, including one in Switzerland, where he learned French and German before beginning college.

In 1929 John Scott entered the University of Wisconsin’s Experimental College, founded in 1927 by Alexander Meiklejohn (1872–1964), an innovator in education who in 1920 had been a founding member of the ACLU. The Experimental College offered what was then a radical educational program: there were neither exams nor grades, professors and instructors lived together with students, and the curriculum, focused on ancient Greek culture, took up the moral and political values of Western Civilization. While it lasted, the Experimental College attracted much favorable attention and was generally held in high regard.

As a student of the Experimental College John Scott dreamed of becoming a writer. During his student years he wrote a novel and some essays on the cultural elite in ancient Athens and the role of the thinker and writer in modern America. Located among his personal papers on deposit at the State Historical Society in Madison is an essay composed towards the end of his first semester in which, under the pseudonym of Smithers, he contemplates his program of study and his future:

Now the important thing is the class struggle. . . . Smithers, your place is in the struggle now.

But an interesting question comes up. Could Smithers serve the class struggle better if he stayed in school in his little white room [with maid service] and looked at the whole thing objectively and then went out as a leader? The answer is no. . . . The place where there is work to be done now is among the workers themselves. . . .

What Smithers should do is to leave off studying Plato and Aristophanes and get a good foundation in Marxism and the more modern interpreters like Lenin. . . . Smithers is still young and has a
great deal to learn, but he is learning and he is beginning to see where he is to fit into the scheme of things. He may stay in his white room a while longer, but it is Marx and not Plato that he will concentrate on, and he realizes that his place is with the workers helping to set up a new world.

Scott would stay at the Experimental College for two more semesters. Then, in the winter of 1931, he decided to head off for the real-life experiment everyone was talking about, the Soviet Union, where the workers were said to be building a new world.

In 1931, when John Scott made the decision to travel to the Soviet Union, America was in a deep depression. Plants were closing. Millions of people were out of work. By contrast, in the USSR hundreds of new plants were under construction, unemployment had disappeared, and there was even an acute labor shortage. Many people felt that something was deeply wrong with the USA, that something extremely important was taking place in the USSR. As Arthur Koestler has written, “if History herself were a fellow-traveller, she could not have arranged a more clever timing of events than this coincidence of the gravest crisis of the Western World with the initial phase of Russia’s Industrial Revolution. . . . The contrast . . . was so striking and so obvious that it led to the equally obvious conclusion: They are the future—we, the past.”

Just as American technology and civilization exerted considerable influence on the Bolsheviks, construction projects in the USSR were making a deep impression on Americans. Scholars, educators, industrialists, and poets were lining up to visit the “vast laboratory” of the new Russia. An advertisement that appeared in The Nation on 16 January 1929 exhorted the periodical’s readers to “go to Russia”:

Intellectuals, social workers, professional men and women are welcome most cordially in Russia. . . . where the world’s most gigan-


Another magazine editor, Ray Long, lauded a trip to the Soviet Union as “the most interesting journey one may make today,” and christened the Soviet experiment “the most important human step since the birth of Christianity.” The American intoxication with the USSR, which gave birth to countless frivolous books in the new genre “The Country With a Plan,” did not fail to overtake the imaginations of American political reformers. Edmund Wilson appealed to progressives to “take Communism away from the Communists” and Charles Beard called for a “five-year plan for America.” In the most memorable phrase of all those uttered about the new Soviet Russia, Lincoln Steffens exclaimed: “I have been to the future, and it works.”

Thousands of Americans were departing for that strange, far-off, and mysterious land of Soviet socialism, some out of political conviction, others desperate for work, and not a few in search of adventure. In addition to the prominent and not-so-prominent “personalities” who traveled to the Soviet Union there was a sizable number of American engineers and skilled workers who went to direct or take part in the great projects of the Five-Year Plan. Not only did these American specialists make an indispensable and not generally appreciated contribution to the Soviet industrialization effort, some of them also left behind a valuable record of their experiences, a record that, with the exception of a few published books, remains buried in obscure journals or scattered in archives across the United States. None of the many interesting or important accounts of the Soviet Union under Stalin by foreigners, however, can match the one by John Scott.

After leaving the Experimental College, Scott, on the advice of his father, undertook to learn a useful trade before embarking for

the USSR. He therefore went to the General Electric Plant in Schenectady, New York, where he completed a several-month training course and received a welder’s certificate. He was now ready, but there were some obstacles to overcome, such as arranging his transit to Europe. In August 1932 he attended the Anti-War Congress in Amsterdam as a member of the American delegation, accompanied by his father, who paid for Scott’s passage to Europe. Once in Europe, Scott still had to obtain permission to travel to the USSR. Since the Soviet Union did not have diplomatic representation in the United States until after November 1933, Scott followed the path of all but those few Americans recruited in New York by the Soviet trade agency, Amtorg, and applied for entrance to the USSR at the Soviet embassy in Berlin. Then, in the fall of 1932, with visa in hand, Scott boarded the train for Moscow. This American college student, not quite twenty years old, disgusted by life in Depression America, enthusiastic about Soviet Russia, equipped with a sharp mind and a three-decker Corona typewriter, set off on the adventure of his life.

When he arrived in Magnitogorsk, John Scott must have been taken aback. The “city” was little more than a disorganized construction site, without roads or sewage pipes, littered with trash and debris. The only housing consisted of endless rows of indistinguishable hastily built barracks and unsightly makeshift huts of sod and thatch. With famine raging in several areas of the country, food was extremely scarce. Compared with American expectations, the workers of Magnitogorsk were shoddily clothed. Accidents were frequent. Sanitary conditions were abominable, disease widespread. Thousands came and left the site daily, as if it were a chaotic train station rather than a new model city. Paradoxically, the nascent world of socialism looked more like a sordid scene out of the old world of nineteenth-century capitalism, such as Marx or Engels might have described it.

John Scott was no doubt startled by the deprivation and the primitive living conditions, but he was no less struck by the energy and sense of purpose everywhere in evidence. In Magnitogorsk he saw illiterates learning to read and the unskilled learning to operate machines. He saw workers who stayed on the job for sixteen hours straight, with little food and in freezing temperatures without adequate clothing. The enthusiasm! People were working to create a new world, a world without exploitation and misery; they were working not for some master but for themselves, with a radiant future extending before them. Scott too was caught up in the excitement, fired by the vision and the promise.

Like virtually everyone in Magnitogorsk, Scott lived in a barrack, although as a foreigner, he was assigned segregated living quarters. There were three recognized foreign settlements in Magnitogorsk: Berezka, originally Amerikanka, where foreign engineers had been housed, but which was soon to become an enclave for the local Soviet elite; block No. 7 of the “socialist city,” in which a few hundred skilled foreign workers and technicians lived; and barrack No. 17, on a hill behind the socialist city, made up of fifty rooms housing about one hundred people, all Germans except for two Americans, one of whom was John Scott.

As barracks went, No. 17 was by far one of the best in the city. It had a seven-acre vegetable garden cultivated by the residents, a sizable and well-equipped “red corner” for recreation, and an innsaim, or special foreigners’ store, that offered better quality food at reasonable prices. Still, a barrack was a barrack, with no running water, toilets, or washrooms, and often without enough light, or fuel for heat.

Although his description of life in barrack No. 17 generally rings true, Scott used poetic license when he described his roommate as a Russian named Kolya. We should not, however, take this to mean that Scott did not know Russians such as Kolya. Scott moved unencumbered in the city, attended school in the
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Russian language with Russians, and had many Russian friends. One eyewitness, after pointing out that Scott spoke Russian and even taught it to the other foreigners, reported that he was "very popular among the Russians."\(^5\)

In Magnitogorsk Scott was known as a young enthusiast. One eyewitness who singled Scott out for his exemplary conduct boasted that "Jack came to the Soviet Union to build socialism."\(^6\) Another contemporary noted that Scott "organized a wall paper in English, in addition to his many other tasks."\(^7\) Scott himself reveals that he attended the Communist University, something which only a select few were able to do. Even before the Party purges [chistki] that began in the city in 1933 had drastically reduced the number of members, no more than two or three per cent of the local population belonged to the Communist Party. Of that small number, even fewer were really active. John Scott was among the active.

It was while at night school that Scott met and was "bowled over," as he put it, by one of the teachers, Maria Ivanovna Dikareva, better known as Masha. The daughter of a poor peasant from a village in Tver Gubernia (now Kalinin Oblast) near Moscow, Masha had come to Magnitogorsk in 1933 after having attended school in Moscow. Her older sister was already living in Magnitogorsk with her husband, a minor official, and a stream of letters from her sister describing life in the new city enticed an already eager Masha to make the trip in 1933. "I just wanted to see the new cities," Masha recalled. "I didn't know if I would stay. But then I wanted to stay. There was something so light and bright and interesting about Magnitogorsk."\(^8\)

Masha worked as a teacher and also went to school, later becoming one of the first twenty graduates of the city's fledgling pedagogical institute. Seven months after arriving in the city she met John Scott at school. They began playing chess, went to the movies and on picnics. In 1934 they were married. In 1935 they had their first child, and in 1938 their second. Their marriage endured until John's death in 1976.

Masha took her new husband to visit her native village, where Masha's father had become the chairman of the new collective farm. The arrival of the American no doubt caused a stir. Indeed, such an improbable event must have further confirmed the impression that momentous changes were taking place in the country. "Certainly we knew [about America in our village]," Masha later told Pearl Buck. "I remember after the Revolution we had a magazine at our house, and in it were pictures, very beautiful machines and very beautiful horses, and my father told us, 'This is an American magazine and the pictures are American.' And he told me, 'You know, Masha, in our country someday it will be also this way. We will have machines, too, and we will have such beautiful things, because now we are already beginning.'"\(^9\) The young couple embodied that new beginning.

In Magnitogorsk the Scotts worked and studied long hours. John Scott was also busy writing. "He wrote all the time," Masha recalled. "Everyday he was writing something, notes, stories, I don't know. He was always hitting away at the typewriter."\(^10\) Scott, who spent long hours toiling in the local archives, interviewing officials, and mostly just observing, took pains from the very start to record his impressions of life in the Soviet Union. The reader is liable to be startled at the fullness of Scott's descriptions and the sense of duty he displays when describing something. So keen was his devotion to detail that, when revealing a

\(^{1}\)Moscow News, 30 June and 4 July 1934.
\(^{2}\)Ibid.
\(^{3}\)Moscow News, 26 May, 30 September, and 2 October 1933.
\(^{4}\)Pearl S. Buck, Talk About Russia (with Masha Scott) (New York, 1945), p. 94.
\(^{5}\)Ibid., p. 13.
\(^{6}\)From an interview conducted on 17 February 1986 at Masha Scott's home in Connecticut.
wealth of normally inaccessible information about an aviation factory in Sverdlovsk, he apologizes for not being enough of an aviation specialist to explain the technology of the planes themselves!

Scott scrupulously chronicles the deprivations and hardships of the time. He presents the cold and lack of fuel, the grumbling in the workers' canteens and the struggle to fill one's stomach, the hazardous working conditions and frequent accidents—in short, everything, just as he and other inhabitants of the emerging steel-town experienced it. Similarly, he carefully notes the use of prison labor, the activity of the security police, and the role of political violence. But if, unlike the authors of many foreigners' accounts of the period, Scott refuses to whitewash what he and the others had seen, he also refuses to engage in sensationalism. He confronts the deprivation and terror squarely, but without making them the focus of his book.

If the poignancy of Scott's book lies not simply in his descriptions of daily existence but in the way he tells the story, it also lies in the story itself—the almost magical creation of an enormous factory-city, in an uninhabited area remote from other urban centers, in a few short years.

Founded in 1929, Magnitogorsk instantly became the symbol of the revolutionary transformation of society that the October Revolution had promised. At the site of an iron-ore deposit just beyond the southern tip of the Urals, as far to the east of Moscow as Berlin is to the west, the Soviet government decided to build not just a steel plant, but one that rivaled (indeed that was modeled after) what was then the largest and technologically most advanced steel plant in the world, the Gary (Indiana) Works of the U.S. Steel Company. When completely finished, the "Soviet Gary" was to produce as much steel annually as the entire Soviet Union had produced in the year before the beginning of the first Five-Year Plan!
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Technology and revolution; iron, steel, and Bolshevism. "The Magnitogorsk steel plant," gloated the propagandists, "is living proof of what Bolsheviks are able to achieve." 13

Along with the colossal steel plant, the Soviet government intended to build a new city, a planned "socialist" city of the future. Magnitogorsk was to be a city in which all the problems of cities known up to that time—congestion, poor sanitation, disease, poverty, and crime—would be eliminated. The socialist city was a dream for a better way of life, for literacy, health, justice, abundance, happiness. But unlike the factory, the city of the future was never built.

Notwithstanding the two superblocks of apartment buildings with attractive public squares and decorative fountains, in appearance the city that emerged more closely resembled the cities of Bolshevik reprobation than those of utopian fantasy. Even after the steel plant had pumped out over a million tons of steel, in the pages of the local newspaper writers were still debating whether Magnitogorsk, with a population of 200,000 people but with no sewage system, permanent hospital, or clean water supply, with only a handful of paved roads, and with a housing stock comprised of one-half wooden barracks and another one-quarter huts made of sod, could be considered a "city" at all. 14

In his chapter "Socialist City," Scott sometimes uses the term to refer to the specific part of Magnitogorsk in which he and Masha—along with no more than fifteen per cent of the population—lived, while at other times he uses it to mean the entire urban agglomeration, without ever making clear in what way either all or part of the city was "socialist." Was Magnitogorsk a "socialist" city, and if so, what made it "socialist"?

The planned city of the future fell victim to inexperience, incompetence, impatience, but, above all, to an inherent contradiction in its conception, for despite the plan to construct a utopian

13 Baksir (Tugboat), Magnitogorsk, June 1932, No. 4, p. 2.
14 Magnitogorskii rabochii (the Magnitogorsk Worker), 1 January 1937.
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was subjected to severe recriminations at Komsomol meetings, their friends were summoned and interrogated, even the threedecker Corona was eventually confiscated.

In an outline for a book on the Soviet Union never written, Scott headed one chapter: “The Purge sours technical success into inhumanity and degradation. Initial hopes of the 1936 constitution become monsters in the hands of the GPU.” It was precisely this dichotomy—economic and social progress versus senseless political repression—that Scott and many others who had been so impressed with the undeniable energy and purposefulness they had witnessed found most difficult to comprehend. When examining Scott’s explanation of the purges, the reader should keep in mind that although his valiant effort cannot be considered satisfactory, even with the benefit of several decades of reflection specialists are not in a position to offer a convincing explanation for what remains one of the great mysteries of the Soviet experience.

Despite the role the purges played in bringing his time in Magnitogorsk to an end, it is significant that Scott did not end his account of life in Magnitogorsk with them. To be sure, he was appalled by the number of people who suffered unjustly, but he recognized that for most people life went on. The purges did not eclipse what for Scott remained the ultimate defining experience of Magnitogorsk, the heroic struggle to build a steel plant and a new way of life. It was Scott’s controversial opinion that such a view was shared by most Soviet citizens. “This was the Magnitogorsk in which I passed five years of my life,” Scott concluded in an earlier version of the book. “I look back on it with profound respect for those who built it in such a short time under such difficult circumstances. It was a city full of vitality and life. The people were studying, looking forward, striving to build something, [something] in which at least many of them believed.”


"Ibid., manuscript "Behind the Urals," yellow-sheet draft.
Union could lose territory equivalent to the size of two or three "Frances" and still carry on the war.

At the same time, Scott rendered certain judgments that we may wish to question. He tended to exaggerate the relative weight of the admittedly striking development of heavy industry east of the Urals. While whole new industries were built in eastern regions, there was proportionally more investment in the older, established centers of industry in the European part of the country, around Leningrad and Moscow, and in the Ukraine. Something of which Scott was aware but was not able to witness was the extent to which the industry in the East that played a vital role in the war effort had been evacuated from the West. And while the presence in the East of a modern industrial infrastructure to which the evacuated factories could be attached certainly enhanced the impact of those mobile factories, it is not at all clear that Stalin alone should be credited with the decision to locate the newly constructed plants in the East. Moreover, as great an accomplishment as the evacuation of industry was, it had become necessary only because of the shocking vulnerability shown by the country's critical western border regions in the early phase of the war. The eastward movement of industry was carried out amidst the chaos that followed the long-predicted German invasion, and this chaos was clearly the result of Stalin's own failure to prepare properly for a war whose necessity he still did not recognize even after it broke out.

While applauding Stalin for what he, Scott, considered to be the Soviet leader's foresight to build up an eastern industrial base, Scott was also convinced that Stalin's industrialization policy, with its uncompromising emphasis on heavy industry at the expense of consumer goods and its ruthless disregard for human life, was vindicated by Russia's performance in the war against the Nazis. However, we may well express astonishment that the Nazis' capture of roughly half of all Soviet industry nevertheless