

THE SOVIET AND US.

Observer Sees Us Less Inclined to Sneer at Bolsheviki Experiments.

By WALTER DURANTY,
Moscow Correspondent of The New York
Times.

On returning to this country after six years' absence one of the things that strike me most is the extent to which ideas and theories about planned economy and the right of labor to share the profits of capital, which formerly were regarded as subversive or visionary—in a word, Bolsheviki—are now being discussed and seriously considered here. At first sight it seemed to me that this was a natural result of the depression, like Bunyan's old story of the traveler who falls into the Slough of Despond and is ready to follow anything that will lead him out of it, even a will-o'-the-wisp. On second thought, however, this judgment seemed too hasty. There are three reasons, each of them, in my opinion, a good and cogent reason, why American attention should now be directed toward what would have been called six years ago Bolsheviki ideas.

First, the "Soviet experiment" has now passed beyond the experimental stage. People no longer sneer at the Five-Year Plan as a fantastic mirage or deliberate deception. They know that, while it cannot be called a complete success, many of its phases have surpassed the Kremlin's own expectation. It must also be understood, as I have repeatedly emphasized, that the Five-Year Plan is not so much a program of actual construction and production, although production and construction are two of its most important features, as a process of national discipline and education, both technical and social. Its initial purpose was to establish the framework of a Socialist State into which should be fitted all the activities, or at least all the major activities, of national life. The actual development of industrial production, transportation and distribution was of secondary importance. I think it must be admitted that the first condition which Kremlin leaders consider of paramount importance is being successfully carried out, and that the shortcomings in production of iron, steel, coal or non-ferrous metals, or the weaknesses of transport and distribution, or indeed the universal shortage in everything that makes for improvement of living standards, from housing to clothing or even food itself, are of lesser moment in comparison.

Machine Does Move.

The Kremlin leaders are not stupid and they are fully aware of the factors in their country which tend to retard material achievement. They know the faults of their people—ignorance, untidiness, lack of discipline, slipshod methods, and the preference for talk over action, all of them the natural consequences of conditions that have existed in Russia for hundreds of years. These evils they believe can be corrected and will be corrected by intensive training, although the process must necessarily be slow. They are, therefore, not unduly disquieted by material shortcomings in the Five-Year Plan. What matters most to them is that their new Socialist framework should be firmly established, not so much as an "experiment," but as the best means by which the errors of the past can be corrected and a better and happier future assured. To put it more simply, the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics has now set going its system of centrally planned economy. This great machine is still new and somewhat unwieldy. It lurches along and its joints creak and groan, but nevertheless it moves, and moves forward, and the creakings and lumberings are due, in the opinion of those who have created it and direct it, to defects of human weakness which can be adjusted, rather than to fundamental errors of design and structure.

It seems to me that thinking people in America today have also begun to realize that this is true and to feel that much of the abuse and ridicule directed against the Five-Year Plan has been unjustified—that, in short, there is at least something to be said for the idea of organizing production, distribution and consumption in a harmonious manner.

Conditions Have Changed.

The second reason for the difference in the American attitude toward "Bolshevik" ideas is the change in conditions in this country itself. Again I do not mean the depression as such, but something far deeper, which perhaps is not the least of the depression causes; that is to say, the lack of harmony between production and consumption. I venture to suggest that the decade before the war closed an epoch in American history in the sense that the territorial occupation of the continent—if one may so explain it—was then complete. I do not mean that there were no further opportunities for the development and reclamation of land hitherto unsuitable owing to climatic and other conditions, but rather that the era of fresh virgin soil, which had lasted since the first colonist set foot on the shores of Virginia, had come to an end. It was no longer possible for surplus populations to move further west and open fresh markets to Eastern industry, as had been the case in the past.

Without the war, necessary adjustments to this state of affairs would doubtless have been made, but the war gave a new and unexpected stimulus to production of all kinds, and almost overnight, it seemed, American industry burst into an efflorescence of mass production on a scale hitherto unthought of. Its products were paid for, first, by the transfer of foreign holdings in this country, and second, in gold, and, when the war ended, finance and industry in America were in the most fortunate position history has ever seen. It is true that the years 1920-21 were difficult and even to many alarming, but in retrospect one sees that the basic cause of the difficulties was the reabsorption into civil life of millions of soldiers and the readjustment of factories from military to

civil purposes. Once that was accomplished all the factors for a boom period were present. The country had been vastly enriched by the war, its industrial technique vastly improved. During four and a half years plus the two years of transformation little had been done, comparatively speaking, to meet the growing demands of the people at the higher standards which they could now afford. The result was a tremendous demand upon industry, a demand which seemed limitless, and each new automobile or country cottage was balanced by new miles of concrete road and new markets for bathtubs, radios, Frigidaires, furniture and other "necessities" which hitherto had been considered luxuries.

The year 1925 in reality marked the virtual peak of this wave of demand, but the factories, now geared to high production, could no longer stop, and a fresh wave was created and a fresh stimulus applied in the form of instalment buying. I need not refer to the corresponding inflation of credit which ensued, with its effects. It is enough to say that in 1929 the bubble burst and in the years that have followed it has become clear—one might almost say to the man in the street no less than to economists—that some form of accommodation between production and consumption is not only desirable but necessary. It is not, therefore, unreasonable that, when the Bolsheviki offer such a form and seem to make it work despite difficulties of technique and organization which are not present in the United States, people here should think it worthy of attention.

No Longer Mysterious.

Thirdly, it would seem to me that the word "Bolshevik" has lost much of its former mystery and terror over here. There are still many honest and serious-minded people who believe that bolshevism is an emanation from the devil, and that its principal purpose is to undermine the institutions of the United States and plunge this country into the mud and blood of chaos, atheism and immorality. I think, however, that there is a growing body of opinion which recognizes that such a conception of bolshevism as applied to the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics today is a trifle old-fashioned, to say the least. I mean that facts do count after all, and the fact today is that the Bolsheviki are no less wholeheartedly engaged in the development of their country and its natural resources than the men who colonized and developed America. It may be argued that it is also a fact that these same Bolsheviki have not abandoned the principle laid down by their Marxist creed of trying to bring about social revolution throughout the world; that is, of undermining or trying to undermine the existing régimes of America and other capitalistic countries. In reality the Marxist principle is not so much that it is the duty of Communists to foment world revolution as the belief that world revolution is ultimately inevitable. The Communist's duty, therefore, is rather to prepare the mass mind of nations to meet circumstances that will subsequently occur.

Agitation a Failure Here.

That is, however, a subtle distinction and does not materially interfere with a third fact which cannot be denied, at least as far as this country is concerned, namely, that, whatever the Communists' aims and intentions may be, Communist agitation in this country is as complete a failure as its worst opponents could desire. It is a fact—and superficially a surprising fact—that, despite the alarming growth of unemployment and the presence of conditions in certain sections of the country which might readily be supposed to induce a revolutionary movement, nothing of the kind has occurred. And, what is more, the efforts of the Communists even in those very sections where difficulty is greatest and social injustice most rife—for it is rife in certain sections and there is no good denying it—have been wholly abortive and, far from strengthening their cause, have actually weakened it.

It is not difficult to understand why this should be the case. In the first place, it may be suggested that, with

the exception of certain industries such as coal and textiles, which were "depressed" before 1929, the effects of unemployment and hard times have not yet been severe enough to arouse any violent feeling of revolt.

Propaganda Is Inept.

In other words, the country is still living on accumulated fat, and the various forms of assistance to the unemployed, whether from group or individual sources, have hitherto been, generally speaking, sufficient. A second reason is the ineptitude of Communist propaganda itself and the failure of those who direct it to understand the character and attitude of the American people. The very conditions of class warfare, class oppression and class hatred upon which the Marxist thesis is predicated are largely absent in America. There exist distinctions of wealth and rank, even if you like a snobbish caste distinction in certain quarters, but that is a far cry from class oppression which breeds class hatred. What the working man in America wants today is what the white-collar employe wants, what the industrial executive wants, what business men want, what bankers want. That is, not an upset of the present system with violence and blood, but a readjustment of the present system so that it may function to the common advantage, rather than, as has been the recent case, to the common detriment. In other words, not a révolution but a reorganization.

The Communist party, both in this country and in Russia, has made the mistake of attempting to measure American tradition by the Russian yardstick and to apply to the freest and most independent-minded nation in the world the measures, methods and principles which centuries of Czarist and semi-Asiatic domination over a people of slaves had made inevitable in Russia.

The Foreign Label.

Then too, of course, the idea of communism in this country is cursed with the label of something foreign, which, as far as an American movement is concerned, is like tying a tin can to a dog's tail. This country has been founded and built by people who wanted their own way and refused to accept orders from any one else. All its traditions make it opposed to the suggestion of foreign control or impulsion. I believe that, if a revolutionary situation truly existed here—which it does not—and if conditions were such that a majority of the population was eager and willing to fight for a Marxist system, the mere fact that Marxism is an article of Russian export, that is to say, is dominated and controlled by the alien Kremlin, would suffice to damn it in the eyes of the American people.

It seems then that the United States today is faced by two possibilities: (1) That conditions will improve in a more or less normal way as they have done after previous depressions; (2) that they will not and cannot improve without suitable changes and adjustments.

Change Would Be Better.

The first possibility is perhaps the most widely desired because the majority of people in an established society dislike change. But as things look today it does not seem readily attainable. The second is fundamentally yet more desirable and perhaps more necessary. In the light of this possibility the present depression would not be, as the Bolsheviki say, a symptom of the fatal disease by which the capitalist system is afflicted, but a growing pain, a sign of youth and virility which might be compared to the position of a vigorous snake when he must change his old skin for a new one.

It goes without saying that the process of readjustment will not be easy or rapid, but, unless I am vastly mistaken, the new ideas which are fermenting in people's minds here will sooner or later bring about not revolution but evolution, not socialism but a modification of capitalism. And perhaps in the final instance, when the change is completed, it may be found that the Bolsheviki, unwittingly, I might almost say against their will, have contributed in no small measure to the development of American society.