

# Even the Bees Work for Stalin



IN this, the third and final talk on the U.S.S.R. which he recorded for the NZBS, PROFESSOR ERIC ASHBY discusses something in which he, as a Professor of Botany, is particularly interested—the Soviet application of science to the problems of agriculture.

WE commonly read that in agricultural science Russia has made staggering progress. We read about extraordinary kinds of perennial wheat, splendid new fruits, amazing coloured cotton, and so on. Much of this is mere journalists' moonshine. Well meaning, but really very dangerous writers on Russia make the most ridiculous exaggerations about Soviet agriculture. The truth is that much Soviet agriculture is still, as one would expect, very primitive; but this should not distract our attention from the really solid work which is being done there. I'll tell you a little about it now.

The Ministry of Agriculture is an enormous organisation. It has recently been split into two ministries, but when I was there it was all under one head, the Minister Benedictov. He controls nearly 1,000 institutes and field stations, with 14,000 scientific workers, and spends on scientific work alone about £15,000,000 a year. The variety of research institutes is extraordinary: institutes for grain culture, cotton, drug-plants, rubber-plants, sheep, reindeer, poultry, rabbits, and bee-keeping.

## How Doth the Little . . .

Let me take you to one of these: to the All Union Scientific Research Institute of Bee Culture. It's some way out of Moscow. You travel to Butova in a train crowded with peasants in their shawls and kapok coats (and often there's someone with an accordion, singing in the carriage). From there, if you go in winter, as I did, you drive on a sledge, sitting on straw, through an oak wood, to the Institute.

The director of the Institute, like most directors of scientific institutes attached to Ministries, is not an experienced scientist. He is what we would call a political appointee; a man trained in administration and alive to the political importance of the Institute's work. He told me how they have 3,500 people learning bee-keeping by correspondence; and summer schools for instructors in bee-keeping every year; and how their research is popularised in pamphlets which are distributed by the tens of thousands. Then he invited me to go round the laboratories.

## Research into Pollination

There's a department of bee diseases, where I saw the drug gramicidin being used to cure bees. There's a department working on the production of red clover with a high nectar-content, for honey. There's a department of technology, where they have discovered that boot polish can be made out of one of the by-products of wax production. But the Institute takes the view that the most important job bees do is not to make honey and wax, but to cause seeds to set in crops and pastures. So the main work of the Institute is on the setting

of seed. They have produced a method of training bees to pollinate a particular kind of flower. All they do is to put a bowl of 50 per cent. sugar in the hive, and, floating on the bowl, some of the flowers they want pollinated; lucerne, let us say. After two or three days' training the bees go out of the hive and pollinate lucerne—and pretty well nothing else. When the lucerne crop has set its seed, your bees can then be trained to pollinate some other plant. I'm quite satisfied that the method works and that in Russia it has resulted in over four times the normal seed production in a paddock of lucerne.

## Mead Instead of Vodka

In another department a new strain of Caucasian bees had been produced which pollinate flowers at much lower temperatures than the ordinary Italian bees. This new strain is useful for getting fruit trees to set in districts where the spring, during blossom time, is cool. When we'd toured the laboratories I had a good country meal with all the staff and we drank mead—an old-fashioned drink made from fermented honey.

I have time to tell you a little about one more agricultural research institute, the famous Institute of Plant Industry in Leningrad. The business of this Institute is to classify and improve all kinds of crop plants. I saw there room after room of metal boxes with seeds

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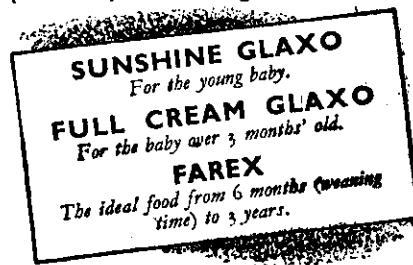


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