

RUSSIA MEANS PEOPLE

(Part of a talk by EDWARD CRANKSHAW in the Third Programme of the BBC)

THE thing that always defeats me when I find myself talking about Russia to people who have never been there is the paralysing consciousness that we are really thinking about quite different things. The word "Russia" to me, and to anyone else who has lived in Russia and really experienced it, stands for the Russian land, and for the Russian people, and for the material and spiritual achievements of these Russian people—for Magnitogorsk, the ballet, the literature of the 19th Century, the medieval icons, the Tsarist Empire, and the October Revolution.

But the word "Russia" to the majority of Englishmen seems to stand for something quite different. The Russian people and the Russian land do not come into it at all. Instead there is a sort of statistical abstraction of power of a kind that never was on land or sea—an abstract power which looks one thing to the friendly and something else to the hostile. To the friendly it is lucidly expressed in terms of constitutions, blast-furnaces, mechanised agriculture, free tickets for the opera, social services, and all other things dear to the heart of total propaganda—and, I may say, to total credulity. While to the unfriendly this abstract power is expressed in terms of concentration camps, police terror, ruthless censorship, forced labour and the ghost of the Comintern. But one thing that is left out of account altogether is the one thing that really matters: I mean the Russian people—who are Russia. (And here may I say in parenthesis that I have heard of the other nationalities in the U.S.S.R. and I know well enough that a Muscovite is not the same as a Circassian. But what I am talking about are the people of Great Russia and those others who have joined with them in imposing the central rule of Moscow first on the Tsarist Empire, now on the U.S.S.R. These are the people who counted in the past and still count to-day.)

If we want to get anywhere at all in understanding the Russians, we must stop thinking about Russia in terms of her institutions and try to think of her in terms of her people. When we think of Russian institutions in terms of our own institutions, and then try to deduce the nature of the Russian people from a totally false picture—and when the Russians do the same with us, as they do—it leads to such a confusion of cross-purposes and misunderstandings that there is no sorting them out at all.

Acts of Faith

In the way they set about the business of living the Russians are widely different from us. They have a completely different background. We should not think of a Russian factory for the mass production of motor-cars in the way we should think of an English factory and people it with Russian-speaking artisans. We should get much nearer to the mark if we imagined a whole village of peasant characters by Chekhov turned loose in a machine shop. That is the kind of thing I mean. A modern production line built and maintained by British engineers and workmen is an admirable conception and a triumph of human organisation and ingenuity. But the same thing built and maintained by peasants out of Chekhov is nothing less than a miracle. It is a monument of human sacrifice And thus already we begin to see differences. We can take them a stage further. The famous Moscow underground is not, like the London tube, an engineering feat of distinction carried out for material ends: it is an engineering feat bordering on the miraculous, and carried out in the same spirit as the building of a medieval cathedral, and at much the same sort of cost in human effort and pain. It is not, as our London tube is, a routine venture designed to give profit to the promoters and material service to the

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"A triumph of human organisation"



"Nothing less than a miracle"

(continued from previous page)

to sample the mountain was to drive straight up from the borough boundary. "You'll be at the hostel in half-an-hour, and if you go on another two miles you'll get the finest view in the country." Fine views unfortunately depend on fine weather, and it is not taking sides in this endless argument to say that all I saw from the Stratford hostel was fog a hundred yards away and ghostly trees close at hand.

It is for the people of Taranaki to pull the mountain to pieces if that pleases them, but it is an odd experience for a visitor to watch the game going on; to discover that he must not quote Hawera in Stratford or New Plymouth south of Inglewood; and to see one of the most perfect mountain cones in the world quartered to balance some enterprising middleman's budget.

(To be continued.)

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