

REVIEW OF RALPH PARKER,
HOW DO YOU DO, TOVARICH?

This volume in the ‘The Soviets and Ourselves’ series is not so much a detached description of the facts of contemporary Soviet life as a warm-hearted piece of special pleading on the part of a writer who has lost his heart to the Russian people, and is personally much distressed by the mutual ignorance which seems to him the main obstacle to understanding between two communities as admirable as those of Britain and the USSR. Mr Parker writes with far greater distinction than the majority of pro-Soviet writers; his account of Russian tastes and habits, of the mode of life of the average Soviet worker or university student or soldier back from the war is based on first-hand knowledge and a degree of sympathetic insight which only exceptional natural affinity with the Russian character can produce. The qualities which he discovers in the Russians are those unobvious properties which penetrating foreign observers have discovered before him – personal virtues and a form of life to which those who once develop a taste for them seem to remain attached for the rest of their lives.

This devotion and, indeed, nostalgia which Russia seems to excite beyond all other countries runs through Mr Parker’s brief pamphlet and insensibly affects the open-minded reader. But the picture, attractive as it is, and, when dealing with his own personal experience, genuinely moving, is not impartial and not convincing. The parallels between British and Russian life are, to anyone who has lived in both countries, superficial to a degree; the picture of life of the average Soviet citizen has been-over-idealised: not indeed falsified in the crudely exaggerated, blindly inaccurate way to which professional Soviet apologists have accustomed us; only touched up, with the shadows magically lifted, the whole made to seem disarmingly human and full of touchingly familiar frailties, and over it all, skilfully conveyed, that enchantment of Russia and

HOW DO YOU DO, TOVARICH?

the Russians with which, even at their most sordid, Russian literature has so often enthralled the Western imagination.

But idealised the picture remains, and while it may make for better political feeling, it does not begin to tell the central truth. The reason for this is that while none of the facts provided seem actually false – the instances of decent and productive existence given are probably authentic enough – it omits the darker side of the picture too systematically. The absence of civil liberties, the suppression of original thought, the fears, mutual suspicions and haunting sense of political insecurity in which all Soviet citizens of the now growing literate class lead their mature lives, largely stultify the political and economic rights guaranteed by the constitution; and while it may not be true that the Russian people are in effect confined to a vast prison from which all light and warmth has been excluded (there is probably more gaiety and humour and vitality in Russia today than either in Western Europe or in Russia herself a century ago), it is even more idle to pretend that the Soviet Union forms a peaceful, industrious, comfortable community, anxious only for a better standard of life, dominated by the same normal impulses as other peoples, and misunderstood and mistrusted only because of the barriers of language and unfortunate historical memories.

The charts, the photographs and diagrams designed to contrast and compare social facts in Britain and Russia tend to mislead if only because relative purchasing power and systems of distribution are not compared and explained. Moreover, whatever the merits or faults of Soviet institutions, they are designed for an unconcealed purpose: to omit to tell us what this is is surely disingenuous, and without such information the system must remain unintelligible. What Mr Parker cannot bring himself to say is that the Soviet system, like Islam at a corresponding period, is carried on by a revolutionary impetus, that it is on the march, that the task of internal reconstruction, important as it may be, is not conceived as separable from the task of assuring internal security by pushing out the frontiers of ideological influence; that this is ingeminated into Soviet citizens through a press controlled more rigidly than any other in the world, and that if we are ever to understand this great and most attractive of peoples, nothing is gained by omitting those factors which, in the eyes of the world today, form the chief basis for the existence of the Soviet Union.

HOW DO YOU DO, TOVARICH?

Listener 38 (1947), 543, 545
Copyright Isaiah Berlin 1947

Posted 17 February 2004