

The Soviet Union

by **howard fast**

I am not old, and flashes of my memory can recall my second and third year of life; and I mention this only to relate the existence of a nation and a society and indeed a world to the span of one individual's memory. I speak of the Soviet Union and of the mighty enclave of socialist nations of which it is a part, but particularly of the Soviet Union; and perhaps it is necessary to do so in these very terms every so often, for it is easy to forget.



It is easy to forget that, historically speaking, it was only yesterday that the first stable socialist social structure came into being. Consider how it was then, only yesterday. Across the soil of France and Belgium, there was a gashed network of dug trenches, torn earth and blasted trees—where a million gallons of blood had been poured out in a filthy and monstrous war. The stink of death and hopelessness permeated the air of the world, and the hopelessness was greatest where

the untold millions of colonial people lived.

In Russia itself, hunger and disease marched hand in hand with hopelessness, and the whole broad land was such a pit of sorrow and suffering as had hardly been known on this earth before. Millions of illiterate peasants walked barefoot and in rags; they watched their children die of starvation, and without medicine or doctors or hospitals, they died with their children of dread diseases that are only names today, of typhus and malaria and smallpox and typhoid and pneumonia and consumption and diphtheria.

In the same hellish comradeship, the working class of Russia worked 12 and 14 hours a day, coughed out their lungs in dank and rotten factories and listened to the hunger wail from their own children. In the trenches and prison camps, workers and peasant died in other ways, died of brutality and cold, of misleadership and barbarism. They faced German machine guns when their own guns would misfire, German tanks when they had no tanks, German planes when they had no planes.

And within all this was the darkness of Feudal thought, of superstition and ignorance, of the primitive, the brutal, the desperate. This was Russia in 1917—this was the dark and terrible land where a handful of the wealthy ruled the millions of poor and sorrowful; and this was the land that stood up in October of that year and burst its chains asunder and cried out for all the heavens to hear that it was free and would never be enslaved again.

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THUS SOCIALISM, began on mankind's earth, and thus there came into being, out of blood and misery and darkness, the beginnings of the brotherhood of man. So it will be recorded, make no mistake, in the histories of ten thousand unborn generations; and in that still un-dreamed of time, when all the stars and the edge of the universe itself will know the wisdom and majesty of mankind, they will still look back upon the October Revolution as the beginning of the end of the darkness.

I don't know whether it is our good fortune or misfortune to be living our brief lives at this particular moment. Life is a precious gift, and once made to us, we must perforce accept it and use it as best we can. We can properly complain that we sit in the midst of mankind's most turbulent explosion and thereby lose much from the smoke and thunder and fury, but I think we have a great advantage over those millions of men and women, each of them with the same spark of divinity as we carry, who never saw the future, not even the thin edge of the rising sun. We are a generation like Moses, a generation that moves, acts, struggles and is rewarded by only a glimpse of the answer; and we are similarly obligated to understand. We have unfettered reason, science and logic, a higher mountain top than Nebo—and perhaps a greater vision too.

And since, all other things aside, we are properly a generation of human beings, we are a generation that exercises petulance as only human beings can. We have waited all the years of man for justice, and yet tomorrow is not soon enough; not soon enough for utopia either—not even soon enough for old wounds to heal.

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THE OTHER NIGHT, I sat until late reading the full report of Nikita Khrushchev to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. It's a book of 160 pages, and it is written with the pace, urgency and excitement of a novel. It is the record of what socialism brought to the dark and bleeding land of Russia in 39 years. It's the story of proud and happy people who have done away with hunger, wretchedness and disease. It's the story of shining railroads built, of mighty grids of electrical power, of vast industries, of new roads and new cities, of great fleets of airplanes, of tractors and penicillin and hospitals, of schools and universities, of rippling wheatfields and herds of cattle—but most of all, of millions of human minds set free, of the right, the holy right of man to knowledge.

It is also the record of mistakes, large and small, of dead-end roads, of wrong turnings and unhappy waystops. It is a record of the old mixed with the new, of saints and villains, of good men and bad men, of the weak and the strong—indeed of all the strange, incredible mixture that comprises mankind in its march forward toward the future.

It says, not in so many words but by its total implication, that you do not easily remake a world. The socialist revolution is not a picnic but a fact, and men will be like gods, but not all at once. It takes time and it takes doing, and the true wonder of the miracle is that it is done by men and women like you and me.

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I WONDER HOW it is that we could have been so patient and understanding of the long, long night—and then have so little patience with the sunrise. Perhaps we have lost sight of something basic—put so well by Lincoln Steffens when he said,

"I have seen the future, and it works."