

106909

# UNDER STALIN

## REPRESSION WITH A DIFFERENCE

### II.—THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING LUCKY

From Our Special Correspondent

It is a strange world in which the Russians live, but it undoubtedly suits most of them. They are, as they have not forgiven M. André Gide for pointing out, even less free, even more rigidly controlled, than the Germans. But they are also on the whole more unqualified in their enthusiasm for the régime under which they live. There is a big difference between the effect of 20 years of isolation and propaganda on a backward semi-Asiatic people and four years of the same treatment on a civilized European nation.

It is not merely because the OGPU has been longer and harder at work than the Gestapo that you hear much less grumbling in Russia than you do in Germany. The propaganda through which Soviet ideology is expressed, unlike its Nazi counterpart, breathes more of hope than of hate. In spite of the complete absence of personal liberty there is a cocky, expansive, sentimental exuberance behind the drab or tawdry setting of the Russian scene. Territorial size has a lot to do with it. Glamour surrounds the Arctic regions (one and a half times as large as the Indian Empire), where the Red Flag now flies over the North Pole. It is not in every Russian's nature to be automatically at the latest triumphs of industrial construction; but few can withstand a feeling of complacency when they contemplate the vast and various areas controlled by the cause to which they belong. The adventurous type of young German, prevented by currency restrictions from travelling abroad for more than the statutory 10 marks will take a Russian, whom duty or pleasure may send anywhere from the Celestial Mountains and the bright bazaars of Samarkand to the forests of Trans-Baikalia or to some mushroom outpost upon the sledged tundra, is in very different case.

### MONGOLIA TO MOSCOW

A corollary to geographical spaciousness is ethnological diversity. The Russians, exempt from racial prejudice, have always "got on well with the natives"; and the young Communist feels a kind of vague pride in his more exotic fellow-workers under the Red Flag. For several days in March Moscow was wildly excited by the arrival of half-a-dozen Buryat Mongolian girls (incongruously but inevitably accompanied by a "political leader"), who had taken the unusual step of skiing to the capital from their homes, a distance of some 3,000 miles; and behind the gushing superlatives with which this feat was hailed it was possible to sense something of the genuinely romantic exaltation which the new Russian Empire arouses in its awakened citizens. German love for the fatherland is, however martially expressed, an introvert and domestic sentiment, a kind of brave nostalgia; the corresponding feeling in Russia is adventurous and extrovert, a pioneering, look-what-we've-got-here ebullience.

Although a comparison of the Nazi and the Soviet régimes can be of only academic interest, it is perhaps worth noting two or three sug-

gestive contrasts. A fundamental one, of course, is the standard of living, which is rising in Russia and falling, or at best stationary, in Germany. Another is a corollary to foregoing remarks about propaganda. An Englishman probably sees, at the first glance, little difference between a Comsomol reading the *Pravda* and a Nazi student reading the *Angriff*, since he feels equally sorry for two young men who both have to do without a free Press. But the difference is there. It lies in the fact that, whereas the Comsomol, but for the Russian revolution, would probably not have been able to read at all, the German student, but for the Nazi revolution, would have been able to read any newspaper he pleased. It is broadly true to say that Stalin's dictatorship has stimulated intellectual and artistic life in Russia, whereas Hitler's has had the opposite effect in Germany. The average standard of German education and culture is still far higher than the average standard in Russia; but in the latter country literature, the theatre, and the cinema, for all that their exponents must walk the ideological tightrope, are full of life and vigour. In a Moscow bookshop you may find a dearth of new books, for every first edition is sold out on sight; but you will not find, as you would in Berlin, that most of the new books are translations from foreign languages and that no young authors of consequence are represented on the shelves.

### LIFE UNDER LUCK

The statement that the Soviet régime is even more closely repressive than the Nazi régime needs one qualification. A Slav bureaucracy, however soulless and tyrannical on paper, must always in practice have a certain margin of softness or elasticity. You have to be lucky—very lucky nowadays—to benefit from this margin; but it is there, just as it would be under a Chinese or an Irish dictatorship. Inefficiency, absent-mindedness, nepotism, corruption, or sheer good nature: these things are latent somewhere in the system. They are in the air in Russia; and that is one reason why the Russians cannot take their rulers quite so seriously as the Germans are obliged to take theirs.

A very important element in the Soviet citizen's existence is luck. In his world, windfalls or disasters are for ever in the offing, governing almost everything from the availability of goloshes to his execution for treason. He has adapted himself to this state of affairs, and there is a fatalistic, semi-Oriental streak in his character which finds it natural and congenial. Both deliberately and involuntarily the régime encourages this streak. The gigantic administrative machine sets out to control every aspect of every activity of every one of its subjects. But it is not a very good machine. Its impact on the citizen, arbitrary already in conception, is rendered doubly so in practice by its erratic working. Uncertainty permeates the Russian's life. Fish, let us say, becomes suddenly unprocurable, none can say why, in all his local shops; and his wife devotes the whole of what is technically known as her leisure to the pursuit of this delicacy. She is not surprised, she is hardly even annoyed, that it should be temporarily impossible to buy fish. She stands in queues, she follows up rumours; and when at last she tracks down a shop which, again for no discoverable reason, is bursting with fish she tastes a keen and compensatory triumph.

Wages are appallingly low. The average wage for the whole Union is about 230 roubles a month. Prices are correspondingly high. But there are all kinds of bonuses and privileges to be won by the deserving from the State; and, though you may not be particularly deserving