

Paul Nizan, French novelist and critic of the Communist persuasion, describes his recent visit to Soviet Tadjikistan, where there ain't no Ten Commandments—or dirty capitalists, either.

A Traveler *in* Tadjikistan

By PAUL NIZAN

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FROM the house I occupied at one end of Stalinabad, I could see the fields divided by rows of poplars and dominated by mountains. It was the beginning of spring. The snow lay fairly low on the mountains, and one might have thought one's self in the Béarn had it not been for all the camels in the hill pasturages and the snakes more dangerous than any we know, lying among thorny herbs. Those mountains are the Hissar Chain, and by climbing toward the east across this range, which stretches out like a finger pointing in the direction of European Russia, one can reach Pamir. The ice-cold rivers, which descend in torrents, have their source in the Pamir glaciers, and the people of Stalinabad said to me, 'To-morrow you will take a plane for Obi Garm.' Or, again, they said, 'You will take a plane for Khorog.'

Ismailov's wife told me, 'Every year I fly to visit my family in Badarshan. It is a little bit hard on the baby because we sometimes have to rise to a height of five thousand metres. If you come back next year, you can come with me.'

I got up early and waited for some one to take me to the flying field. But at noon or one o'clock someone came from the Central Committee or the Commissar's Council to tell me that we could n't go that day because the Obi Garm and even the Khorog air fields were covered with rivulets from the spring rain.

Everybody thought that we were really going to Obi Garm or Khorog, and they spoke about it so much that finally all the poets in Stalinabad thought that we had gone and returned. We felt above us the presence of invisible Pamir. In reality we sim-

ply saw the finger of Pamir, of the Hissar Mountains, behind which lay the Zeravshan and the Turkestan Mountains. And behind those peaks, above the blooming orchards of the Zeravshan valley, the blue cupolas of Samarkand . . .

Every day I met people who had come from Pamir and from the autonomous territory of Badarshan with memories of the civil war and enough stories to last them the rest of their lives. Davlat-Cho, the poet who was studying in the Communist university, recited ballads against opium and the Aga Khan in the Badarshan dialect. And the secretary of the Central Control Commission, who was the son of a poor Pamir peasant, filled whole evenings with stories of the revolution in Badarshan.

'In Pamir,' he said, 'the revolution was easy. There were no kulaks, and along the frontier posts we had contacts with the soldiers, who received newspapers. Immediately there were soldiers' committees in all the stations, and at the end of three weeks the officers fled toward the Afghanistan frontier. The young men went down to Tashkent to get arms from the Red Army. I was then in a missionary school, which sons of merchants and orphans attended. I was eighteen years old and a member of the Red Army. I was in charge of a frontier post of twenty-five men, and I belonged to the Comsomol. There was fighting along the frontier. I was made prisoner in China. They threw me down an old well. I almost died, but finally they exchanged me for another prisoner, and I am not dead. Then I came down to Stalinabad. I was a member of the revolutionary committee. I have fought with Ibrahim Bek, and, when

I went to Samarkand, the people threatened to kill me. I am secretary of the Central Control Commission, and I shall continue my studies in Moscow.'

Thus did the people speak of Pamir, but it was impossible really to get there. It was overpowering to feel its enormous presence and those heaps of mountains rising to more than seven thousand metres, to know that one was at the edge of the Roof of the World, the conjunction of China and India, and that it was impossible to plunge deeper into the centre of our continent, thousands of kilometres away from any ocean.

We therefore did not go up to Pamir that time, and afterward we did not regret it too much because the most interesting people from Pamir had come down to Tadjikistan, where they held posts as poets, agricultural engineers, people's commissars, presidents of the republic, or commanders of the Red Army.

Pamir is really important only for its frontier guards and for its prospectors, who come by the Turksib from the Lena gold fields to find the land where the gold that rivers carry is born. The Ismaelites smuggle these people across the Indian mountains to pay tribute to the Aga Khan, who is such a good friend of Chiappe and Citroën at Deauville. Pamir is really important only to members of expeditions sent out by the Academy of Sciences and to army mountain climbers.

II

Above the torrents we saw villages clinging to the mountain side. That was Asia. The earthen walls of the houses and the courtyards spread out,

teetering blindly. Sometimes trees clustered around a small cupola or a wooden portico: that was a mosque, whose priest had fled to make way for the schoolchildren. In the streets, during the hot hours of the day, one met only donkeys. Often great cloud banks stopped at a height of fifteen or eighteen hundred metres against the mountain side, and terrible storms burst forth, since it was the storm season for them.

Generally, the president of the kolkhoz invited us to drink green tea in the director's house, which a rich man had formerly inhabited. There were carpets on the hard earthen floor of the courtyard, and kolkhoz members, seated on their haunches, smoked water pipes and talked business. Notices in the Tadjik language plastered the walls, notices about canals, for this is a country where the distribution of water is more important than the possession of land. On those green and yellow pictures one read the lessons of the ancient countryside. The president of the kolkhoz was almost always a Tadjik or sometimes an Uzbek. He might have a white beard, or he might have the clean-shaven face of a young man.

III

In the villages of the Varzob valley, we met the poet Rabei, who looked as though he were taking a walk and crossed our path by chance. He recited poems for us on the construction of kolkhozes, written in the manner of Hafiz, or verses on the civil war, which obviously drew material from ancient war stories. Sometimes we visited orchards where young men wearing multicolored, striped-silk coats spread

out their rugs and displayed piles of blue porcelain. But then the storm would come up, and we had to leave the garden and seek the shelter of a house. In a corner of a courtyard the women belonging to the family of the president of the kolkhoz cooked rice mixed with pieces of mutton and rabbit in large metal cauldrons.

On the opposite side of Stalinabad we visited a kolkhoz bearing the name of the poet Lakhuti, who had been a revolutionist in Persia but came here to stir up revolution in Bokhara, which then belonged to an emir. He wore the insignia of the Central Executive Committee of the Republic of Tadjikistan, and many factories, schools, and kolkhozes between Khodjent and Kanibadam bear his name. He said, 'I have more properties than a lord,' and laughed. In the morning, we inspected the fields belonging to the kolkhoz, accompanied by the soldiers and poets of Stalinabad. In the country, children filed to kindergarten behind their guardian. There were clusters of fruit trees and great expanses of plowed land.

The kolkhoz teacher was twenty years old. She accompanied the president of the kolkhoz, who wore boots over his heavy knitted stockings. 'The old president was a thief,' she said. 'He killed ninety-five bullocks belonging to the kolkhoz in order to break up collectivization.'

She was a candidate for the Communist Party, and she had studied in the Communist university at Stalinabad. 'It's hard work,' she said gaily. Her brother was naturally a poet. Fat snakes slept in the sun at the foot of the hedges. We drank tea on the earthen platform of the school, a former mosque. The girls wore starched

collars, silver ear rings, and coral necklaces, and they had no idea of biting the edge of their red and white veils as their grandmothers used to do. The boys and girls sat down with us under the five plantain trees, behind whose leaves the mountains glimmered. They brought us buttermilk and great slabs of bread, which rolled up like pieces of cloth. We discussed the affairs of the kolkhoz, which had raised wheat and was now starting on cotton. The children organized dances in the courtyard, and groups of women, coming back from the fields with the men, sat down whispering.

Lakhuti greeted them and spoke of the future school, which would be more beautiful than this old earthen and carved-wood mosque. He made jokes that amused the women. One girl said, 'They don't have to wake us up to send us to work any more. We now work for ourselves.' The men who had come with us from Stalinabad mentioned cotton. They were Party members or writers who edited the *Tadjikistan Communist* and the *Path of Lenin*. Several children wore the red neckties of the Pioneers; they listened intently. Life seemed secure and tranquil, but a woman spoke of the recent times when men cut the throats of their wives because they unveiled themselves. Then a man told the stories of the battles of the Basmachis War before we understood that this was only the beginning of peace over Asia—the land of tremendous misery, of famine, of rag-clad crowds, of epidemics, tempests, migrations, and madness.

In Stalinabad, which had ceased to be a small village, the cars belonging to the commissariats turned corners down streets set at right angles to each

other and bordered by young trees. At the door of the Central Committee of the Party, the village militants dismounted, and the cars started noisily. In the garden of the Central Committee large black kites fell to the ground. Huge white buildings replaced the old shacks. The publishing house was upstairs. Kolkhoz workers and Red Army soldiers came to the large Tadjikiz library to buy Lenin's books and Gorki's novels. In the evening the people of Stalinabad walked along the avenues, eating dried apricots, pistachio nuts, and ice cream. The Tadjiks drank green tea, lying on rugs and listening to the singers and the musicians. In the park the Red Army orchestra played late into the night. The theatre buzzed with human voices. The Congress of Tadjik writers was going on, and great bands of young people had come from Khodjent, Kanibadam, Kurgan-Tube, Faisabad, and Obi Garm with notebooks full of poems. They all saluted the writer, Aini, who had written the first revolutionary poem in the Tadjik language and whom the Emir of Bokhara had tortured before the Revolution. At the mill house the poets arrived and talked to us, sitting around the tables. We lit oil lamps because there was no electricity. Rabei told the story of his life.

IV

'I am a poor peasant,' he said. 'To-day I belong to the kolkhoz. I have always composed poems, but I never wrote them down. Here is the way my life goes: I spend five days in the city and five days in the villages. I know all the villages in the Varzob valley, and I talk to the peasants. My poems reflect their life. I have composed

2,614 verses about them. In these poems I speak about the brigades, the Vakhshstroi, the hard life of the peasant, and the change that has occurred in the villages.

'Two years ago I learned how to read. Until then I did n't know that poems could also be written. They published a book of my poetry at the Tadjikiz, and since then I have brought around some new ones, but I have n't heard from them yet. I waste my time in the city. My village is fourteen kilometres from Stalinabad, and it is easier to roam the mountains in search of new stories than to get money from the Tadjikiz.'

The poet Razid-Djan was the son of a Moslem priest. He concealed his father's former occupation, and he had been excluded from the Comsomol. But he acted and danced in the National Theatre and composed verses about the great construction going on. In the night the poets and the young women, who answered to such beautiful names as Musafara and also composed verses, recited these compositions in a mixed language. 'It is not easy,' they said, 'to sing of socialism with the masters of Firdousi. When shall we be freed from the old masters of Bokhara?'

The journalist Gabarov chanted the poems of Hafiz in the Iranian falsetto technique, and at the end of a certain time he forgot he was a man because of his cooing and his bird-like trills. He was an abandoned child who had come from Persia by following chance routes. Socialism had adopted him. These evenings created a poetic exaltation that enervated everyone present. Armenian cognac and the ultra-sweet wine of Kagor came to the rescue of poetic madness.

The poet Pavel V. also recited chants, which he had composed on Siberian themes. He was the son of a kulak, and no one knew whether poetry was not simply a barrier between him and the life of a robber baron, a train thief, or a cattle slaughterer. When he was drunk, he chased the women. He slept with Shura, who was a servant in the commissars' rest house. Shura was a blackish woman, the daughter of a Tadjik mother and a Caucasian father. She had had two husbands, the Basmachis had kidnaped her, and no doubt she had slept with the mountain chiefs; she had seen them cut off a woman's lips and breasts. Her left forearm was tattooed with the strange symbol of her complicated past—a luminous anchor and cross intertwined with two clasped hands in the foreground.

V

On all these plateaus groups of workers were building in spite of the hot sunshine, in spite of the insects, in spite of the landslides. The earth was melting for the first time after long centuries without water. 'This land has never known water,' the chief engineer said. 'When she feels it coming, she swallows it up like a sponge. There are places where the land will drop a few metres this year. We'll have to rebuild all the houses.'

Russian and Tadjik workers lived in long whitewashed earthen barracks or in wooden houses. The Mohammedan workers had built mud huts, which imitated the form of their native dwellings. The nomads were beginning to turn up the soil that they had done no more than traverse for generations. Thus does the world

change. The Kazaks dug into the sides of the ditches wherever they came upon snake holes.

The Kazaks bought bread, sugar, and plates in the coöperatives belonging to the construction works. Certain encampments resembled the rear lines during a war. And a war was going on. They exploded cartridges to make water-holes. Steel shovels plowed through the flowers of the steppe like tanks. On the threshold of the white barracks nurses from the large cities gazed over the plateaus. Women pushed carts, for women had enlisted in this war. But the end was near. The builders were preparing to leave. Demobilization was in the air. The construction poems were already written, the construction novel was already published. In the half-empty villages near the great barrage, the wind blew through the débris. The rooms were emptied, one by one. In the garage rusty old parts of trucks were piled on top of each other. The agriculturists were waiting for the engineers and the builders to leave in order to take their places.

VI

Along the Piandj there was a frontier post called Nijni Piandj. In Central Asia frontier posts are no paradises. Nijni Piandj lies on the right bank, which is ten or fifteen metres above the brownish waters of the river. On the left bank lies Afghanistan. Ferry boats ply between Nijni Piandj and Termez. A piece of railroad track goes in the direction of the Vakhshstroi. At the top of the village the frontier guards live in a building that looks like a lighthouse. On a rock that overhangs the river a

sort of watchtower surveys the Afghanistan plain. A young G. P. U. commander is in charge.

The people live in long houses typical of Central Asia. A corridor goes from one end to the other, and all the rooms open onto this one passage. The furniture is made of boards, and pictures of the Revolution line the walls. The past of the men who live in these houses does not promote confidences. Maybe it was the fault of the sun and of this trip to places that are in the power of the invertebrate animals, but we got the impression that this was a desperate land, where people whose life had no other issue would spend their last days. Dirt and neglect covered the houses, the narrow streets, the walls. The men wore torn shirts, but, after all, at lunch in one of the long houses with the heads of the G. P. U. and the members of the Soviet, we did not find despair on the lips or in the words of our hosts. That was simply part of the landscape, and they themselves did not notice it because they had things to do and a frontier to guard.

The children played. The women knew how to laugh. The G. P. U. commander, the secretary of the cell, who was a fat, gay, curly-headed man, the station master, who wore a gray linen duster, a cap, steel-rimmed spectacles, and a tiny moustache (he resembled a French teacher so much that I expected at any moment to hear him talk about pedagogical conferences and the national syndicate) accompanied us to the juncture of the Piandj and the Vakhsh Rivers. They took their arms, both guns and pistols, which hung against their thighs in wooden holsters. The cars were loaded with ammunition. But wartimes were

over. Our companions thought only of hunting. 'We're going to the tiger's plateau,' the secretary of the cell said. Sometimes tigers swim across the Piandj River, they say. Antelopes galloped through the brush, and the cars pursued them between the trees, but they did not kill any. Pheasants flew heavily. The commander of the frontier post asked me to tell him about the Saint-Cyr school and the Polytechnique because he was giving lectures to his men on the capitalist armies. He was twenty-two or -three years old and did not want to tell the stories he already knew. It was so hot that it was difficult to ask questions.

'Are n't you bored at Nijni Piandj?' I inquired.

He smiled and replied, 'One is not bored when one protects the frontiers of socialism.'

VII

Along the Vakhsh River the cables had been broken by the rising tide. The boat was loose, and there was a great hue and cry. The People's Commissars, who were going on an inspection tour, were waiting to cross. Men on horseback plunged into the river, and the people standing on the banks cried as they saw the horses disappear

in a yellow flood and reappear somewhere near the horizon. When the boat was repaired, it took hours to make the crossing. In a small room of the teahouse near the bank an old man mourned over a prostrate body and chased flies.

'My son is dead,' he cried.

The boy had had his head crushed by the boat when it was crossing.

On the other side of the mountains night awaited us, unfurled against the hills. A lynx crossed the road. Jackals cried. Above Stalinabad red stars shone like the signs of a new nature. Red flags waved in the searchlights. The people of Stalinabad, clothed in white, walked through this night of forewarnings. The soldiers were getting ready in their barracks. Regiments of Red Cavalry men came down from the frontiers. The pioneers dreamed of holidays and songs. An airplane with a star on either wing flew overhead. The Tadjiks smoked and slept on the platforms of the teahouses. The orchestras still played in the park. No one wanted to sleep. Telegrams kept arriving in the office of the *Tadjikistan Communist* about Paris, New York, Moscow, and the workers of the world. It was the night of May first.

This story, as exotic in style as it is in setting, introduces a young French poet, whose work has been recently seen in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*.

Esthonian HONEYMOON

By AUDIBERTI

Translated by WALLACE BROCKWAY

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THE fatal day, I was already up at dawn, although the day before I had gone (can *bad gone* be right—Mme Bruneau's lessons are so far away!) to bed at two or three o'clock. My throat was parched. I walked the floor like a squirrel in a cage. I got my little belongings ready. To some I had to say good-by; others I was going to use. My wedding gown, extremely smart, entirely of white taffeta, with even whiter seams, and a regular garden of wild strawberries at the waist, from Schrofstein and Caroline. At eight o'clock, I was all ready. Just to kill time, I packed the superb trunks that are to follow me by train with lingerie, dresses, sweetmeats. Then Mama told me I was wrong to rouge my nostrils—she said it made me look as if I had a cold in the head. I had to unveil and then reveil (shades of Mme Bruneau, what do you think of *this* word?). My betrothed, the noble Peïpus (it seems that's what

the Esthonians call Raoul), turned up, at nine o'clock, in an eruption of registered letters, visiting cards, and flowers of all hues.

Dear little Gisèle (do you remember when your face was all frozen, and I made that silly pun about you?), I so much want you here, so that I might cry on your shoulder! Those two young women, one larger (but which? You? I? Our souls are so mingled . . .)—don't you think this would be grand? The photographers would have taken us together (*would have taken*, is that right?). Where I am now, far from Paris, far from Capelle-Majoural (Tarn-et-Garonne), this business of participles seems almost improbable to me. I try to find a meaning for them in the shapes of trees and clouds, but nothing here gives them a real meaning, and I must get you to reassure me, to tell me that, somewhere, all this exists.